

REGINALD A. RAY

The Practice of
**PURE
AWARENESS**

Somatic Meditation
for Awakening
the Sacred

“Read this book and be awakened throughout your whole body. *The Practice of Pure Awareness* reminds us that every last part of us is meant for joy, and our whole body is as vast as the cosmos.”

—ADYASHANTI

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*The Awakening Body:
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The Wisdom of Tibetan Buddhism

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PURE
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FOR MY CHILDREN, TARA, CATHERINE, AND DAMIAN



The great wisdom dwells in the body.

—Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, *As It Is*, vol. I

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE PRACTICE OF PURE AWARENESS, by this or one of its many other names, has been the ultimate aim of Buddhist meditators since the time of the Buddha. Over this long history, there have been countless lineages that have developed their own unique ways of speaking of the practice and of making the journey to its beatific end. The tantric approach of Tibet is distinctive among these for its emphasis on our body, our physical being, as the most accessible and effective gate to that ultimate awakening. My own meditation training has occurred over the past fifty years primarily within the Tibetan lineages, and while I have explored the other major Buddhist contemplative traditions often to great benefit, for me the Tibetan approach has been by far the most powerful and transformative.

My own root teacher, Chögyam Trungpa, transmitted these tantric teachings to me and his other close students. There is little original in what I am writing about here; I am just trying to pass on to you the core and the essence of what I learned from him, but to do so in a way that I hope will make the most sense to you and not be too difficult to access and assimilate. Trungpa once said, “As an individual, I am nothing. However, there are the teachings, and it is they that have made my life supremely meaningful.” It would be ridiculous for me to compare myself in any way to him, but his words have helped me a great deal because, as the years have gone by, I find myself feeling more and more the same way. The important point, though, is that in these teachings he gave the essence of *his* life to me and his other early students, and in so doing he gave me *my* life. My highest aspiration is to pass something of that gift on to you.

There have been a few other Buddhist meditation masters whose example and teachings—sometimes in person, sometimes in recordings and books—have been deeply impactful to my understanding and practice. Although much could be said about each, I just list their names here as a way to acknowledge the

immense debt I owe to them: Khenpo Gangshar Wangpo, one of Trungpa's gurus; His Holiness Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, the Sixteenth Karmapa; Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche; Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso; Thrangu Rinpoche; Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche; the nineteenth-century siddha vagabond Patrul Rinpoche; Master Hongzhi, a twelfth-century Chinese Chan teacher; and the Zen master Suzuki Roshi.

This book is the outcome of a community of practitioners studying and meditating together over a period of several decades. That community includes not only members of the Dharma Ocean sangha but, more expansively, all those who have listened to, explored, and provided feedback about the somatically based practices described here: students at Naropa University and the University of Colorado; people who have attended talks and workshops; those who have followed my teaching online or who have taken my various Sounds True recorded programs as their prime avenues of access; meditators, bodyworkers, healers, dancers, athletes, and practitioners of all ilks; additional folks with an interest in the body and embodied spirituality; and many others around the world.

A most important person in the recent evolution of these teachings has been my spiritual consort and partner, Caroline Pfohl. Bringing a depth of experience with Chan Buddhism, Taoism, and Chinese medicine acquired over some three decades in Asia, she has challenged me continually to see things from a different angle, to sharpen and refine my own understanding, and, most of all, "to walk the talk." When she arrived in Crestone, Colorado, thirteen years ago wanting to study in this lineage, almost the first words out of her mouth were, "Reggie, I sense you may not fully embody the teachings you are offering, and without that, they aren't going to mean very much or help people in the way they could." In the subsequent years, as I continued my teaching work, she has consistently encouraged me not to lose sight of my own journey and to deepen my practice so that it more truly reflects what I am trying to transmit.

At this point, Caroline and I and all those who have practiced with us have pursued what has been an extraordinarily compelling journey of exploration and discovery. Everything in this book is the result, first and foremost, of course, of my own study and practice of what I learned from my principal teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and my other meditation teachers. It is also the outcome of the alchemical process of practice, experience, and discussion that has been going on between Caroline and me more or less nonstop—24/7, as they say—since we met. The writing of this book has been very much part of this

process, with Caroline reading and rereading each new draft and detecting where I have slipped off the point or am not expressing the teaching clearly enough, often finding exactly the right word when I can't.

Finally, equally and no less importantly, this book is the result of what has come about as I have sat in the teacher's seat, teaching meditation and receiving feedback about the practitioners' experiences. Over the years, I have been very fortunate to have many intelligent, questioning, and courageous—and sometimes outrageous—students who have scrutinized, loved, and looked into me and what I teach each step of the way, to see what lands and proves itself in practice. And so it has been that many, many people have contributed in a direct and material way to *The Practice of Pure Awareness*, some in very great measure. I thank them all; this is their book as much as mine.

I also want to make special mention of Ms. Liz Shaw, managing editor of Shambhala Publications, who has been my principal editor in this and my previous book, *The Awakening Body*. I have known Liz since 1999, when we met at Naropa. In a class, I was giving a talk on the inescapable suffering of the human condition and how we all refuse to accept it and instead fight against it tooth and nail. At that time, someone close to Liz was going through an agonizing and life-threatening ordeal. Liz heard the teaching at a deep and thoroughly existential level. She reports that she was moved to tears by the talk and never forgot it. And we have been closely connected ever since. Liz is not only the most insightful, experienced, creative, and engaged editor I have known—I feel like we almost write the books together—but she has taken the trouble to know my teachings from the inside and to inhabit them. Something that, at least in my experience, is rare in the present-day world.

Well-known is Ecclesiastes 1:9, "There is nothing new under the sun," and this certainly applies to what I am writing about here. In fact, I am wanting to transmit to you something that is not only not new, but might be—if you believe in other lives and other universes—far older than the sun itself. We, in modern culture, often seem so ready and willing to credit anything new and, however untested, to put our trust in it. At the same time, we seem prone to suspect anything "traditional," or just old, often dismissing it without even bothering to find out what it is or if it has value.

We could also take the opposite view: that there might be a reason why certain things, especially spiritual things, have endured in human cultures, sometimes for millennia, beyond the reason of simple human inertia. We might also

consider the possibility that the only thing of true and lasting worth could be something that stands beyond time, has been felt by humans forever, and yet can be experienced—by us! Something that presents itself as more real than anything else. And perhaps it is just this that can have the most profound, transformative, and lasting impact on how we live our daily life, far beyond anything that comes and goes. In any case, that is the proposition of this book.

INTRODUCTION

“THE GREAT WISDOM DWELLS IN the body.” This is the primary message of the Indian tantras and of Tibetan Buddhist lineages that follow them. But what does it actually mean to say this?

The Great Wisdom in question is nothing other than the awakened state, full enlightenment as understood in Buddhism. In Tibet alone, many additional terms are used for it: our basic nature, great emptiness, the natural state, self-born wisdom, buddha nature, *rigpa*, Mahamudra, and so forth. It is the Pure Awareness that is the subject of this book.

But what does it mean to say this Great Wisdom or Pure Awareness dwells in the body? This remarkable teaching of tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism claims that it is in this human body of ours, and this body alone, that we will actually discover the ultimate spiritual illumination, where we will be able to experience it for ourselves and find the definitive transformation we seek.

If the Great Wisdom “dwells in the body,” then obviously we are going to have to look into our body to find it. But how are we to do this? As we will see, the spiritual journey to realization is entirely about looking into our body, but in a very particular way.

Specifically, there are several steps to this inward somatic journey, beginning with our ordinary, immediately present human body and ending, if it isn’t too much to say, with our complete and perfect—and fully embodied!—realization.

To look ahead for a moment, the first step is to learn, in an almost mechanical way, what I call “the posture of Pure Awareness.” There are many aspects to this posture, and I plan to teach you each one individually and then help you appreciate them as parts of an organic and unified whole. Although, in the beginning, we will just be learning how to sit in our meditation posture, as our journey continues we will discover that the posture itself opens up an

increasingly vast and subtle interior somatic world. And then, as we progress, we will begin to touch dimensions of ourselves that are beyond time and space; and here is where the Great Wisdom, it is my hope for you, will shine forth.

It is said in Buddhism that the body is the great temple of enlightenment. Vajrayana goes further and states that when we understand and experience our own human body in the most profound, subtle, and comprehensive way, we find that—at least for us humans—the body itself incarnates the fullest, most complete realization available throughout all the realms of existence.

What Is Pure Awareness?

The title of this book, *The Practice of Pure Awareness: Somatic Meditation for Awakening the Sacred*, encapsulates everything I want to show you here. *Practice* is, of course, something we do rather than something we think. Essentially, this is not a book of ideas but of methods and techniques for opening our eyes or, more accurately, our bodies, so that we can see, sense, and feel what is true and real without the usual ego distortions.

Pure Awareness refers to the ultimate ground of our present being, a field of awareness that is vast, immaculate, and limitless in its depth and scope. In Pure Awareness practice, the practitioner aims to develop an intimate experience of this ground and, ultimately, to live life from it and in terms of it.

Somatic indicates the unique Tibetan Vajrayana or tantric approach to Pure Awareness practice, one in which a complete incarnate presence within our bodies, our relationships, and our lives coincides with the attainment of ultimate spiritual realization.

We will be talking about *Awakening* here because this awareness is already present in fully developed form within us, rather than needing to be manufactured or created anew.

Sacred, a basic theme of the Buddhist tantra, refers, not to some kind of rarified, specialized experience along the path, but rather, how we experience everything once our bodies are open and awake to the very nature of reality itself. It means to indicate the entirely nonordinary experience of life in which everything we are and go through is, eventually, seen as brimming with Life itself and ultimate being or reality.

The Goals of This Book

In the course of the journey we are about to undertake together, I hope to accomplish several things for you:

1. Teach you the practice of Pure Awareness itself and help you assimilate the instructions so that they become your own.
2. Speak to you about the blockages, obstacles, and resistances that inevitably come up for everyone who practices at this depth. I want to summarize what the most common impediments are and suggest means by which you can work creatively with them in order to find your way through.
3. Offer some tips, suggestions, and guidelines to help you establish a consistent, reliable, and satisfying daily meditation practice. Given how overly busy and distracted our lives can be and how overwhelmed many of us feel today, setting in place a regular practice is no small challenge.
4. Provide you with some historical, social, psychological, and scientific contexts along the way to enable you to better understand the practice itself as well as the journey we will be making within the context of the contemporary world.

The Story behind This Book

Perhaps it will be helpful for me to tell you a little of how I came to write this book. I have been a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism most of my life—for more than fifty years, going back to my early twenties. During this time, I have had the great good fortune to study with many deeply trained and well-practiced lamas. I have also been fortunate, as a university instructor, with my classroom as a laboratory and my summers free, to be able to spend much of my time studying, practicing, and teaching what I learned from Trungpa Rinpoche and my other Tibetan teachers. Looking back, it sometimes seems that I've had a mission—even if I was only partly conscious of it—to try to make sense of this rather strange tradition and my attraction to it and to see what it might have to offer me and the rest of us in our present world. The journey has been mostly inspiring, often exciting, but always more than I could ever handle.

There have been many unexpected challenges along my path, but one stands out: early on, I realized that I could not take Tibetan Buddhism at face value; I could not simply “follow the rules”; it was not going to be that easy. I was

encouraged in this by my root teacher. In fact, when I was with Trungpa Rinpoche, whenever I (always on the lookout for shortcuts) would try merely to imitate something Tibetan, he would say, “You are an American. The true dharma is to be found right here, not anywhere else. Your spiritual journey needs to be about just this. You can’t be a Tibetan. Nobody is going to give you the answers. You are going to have to figure this whole thing out for yourself.” He started saying this to me in our very first meeting, in 1970, and it set the agenda for my entire journey from then on.

It was quite clear to me from my first awareness of Tibet as a teenager that traditional Tibet held a unique spirituality, one with a depth and power far beyond anything most of us modern people have ever experienced or even imagined. That perspective was why I sought out Trungpa Rinpoche in the first place. This was confirmed many times over after I met him. At the same time, with his help, I came to see that its spirituality was often obscured and sometimes buried under a thick overlay of Tibetan cultural assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, practices, and forms of behaviors. In some cases—particularly when it came to Tibetan classism, sexism, elitism, and the extreme emphasis on hierarchy and deference based on rank, as well as what we might call “cultural egotism”—much of the overlay seemed to run counter to the core values of Buddhism. And it certainly ran counter to the spirituality I was learning from Trungpa Rinpoche. To be frank, among the many great lamas I have met and studied with, Chögyam Trungpa was and remains the only one whom I experienced as entirely free of all of this Tibetan “baggage.”

Authentic Spirituality and Cultural Baggage

As is now patently obvious to many, cultural trappings such as these often present an immense, almost insurmountable obstacle to modern people attempting to connect with the genuine spirituality of Tibet. On the one hand, some of us—following, sadly, the view of many of the more traditional Tibetan teachers—conclude that at least some, if not all, of the cultural trappings are essential to Tibetan Buddhism. Then we end up trying to force ourselves into a rigid and alien cultural mold, leading to all kinds of emotional, psychological, and spiritual problems. We are susceptible to remaining disempowered and infantilized, always looking to the lamas to tell us what we should think, do, and even experience.

On the other hand, others of us see through the glamor of the trappings quite clearly, and we correctly deduce that they have little to do with true spirituality. But then we take another, in my view unfortunate, step and conclude that this is all there is to it. We think that Tibet is nothing more than a fascinating but finally archaic society with little to offer us or our world. And so we turn away.

This is a shame, because the alternatives of either making ourselves ill by remaining in a lifelong oedipal dependency or rejecting the whole thing out of hand are quite unnecessary. In my experience, the spirituality of Tibet in its most basic and integral form is authentic and real; but it is not about Tibet, Buddhism, or even religion. Rather, it is about how to discover, engage, mature, and realize our deepest and most complete humanity.

This is, in fact, the tantric view. In that sense, the core spirituality of Tibet—if we can get to it—is fully compatible with today’s world and can be completely realized by people like us. More than this, it offers something essential to human happiness that we in our modern world either never had or have lost. In any case, it is something we do not currently have and desperately need. This was the essential message of Chögyam Trungpa; it was what attracted me to him and what sets him apart from the other great lamas I have met.

At the same time, in order for the core spirituality of Tibet to become available to us in its essential form, the dross of the cultural trappings does need to be burned away; and this is going to be a difficult and painful process for all of us, traditional Tibetan teachers as well as contemporary aspirants. We are all going to have to come out from wherever we are hiding. If we are hiding in the oedipal womb—more likely a prison—we are going to have to come out into the bright sunlight, naked and alone; letting go of everything we have been told and the safety and security of the traditional womb, we have to begin the lonely journey of figuring out what the dharma is and what it means for us.

If we are traditional Tibetan lamas, would it not make sense to distance ourselves from the Tibetan cultural identity and ego and attempt to enter more fully into the reality of those we are wanting to teach? To explain, “cultural ego” refers to deep and unquestioned attitudes—I would say unconscious belief systems and emotional assumptions one may have as a result simply of being born into and trained in the traditional Tibetan context. These concern the superiority of Tibet and its spirituality as compared to other cultures and forms of spirituality. The issue is not whether this assumed superiority is true or false, but rather that these beliefs are deeply engrained at a level within where they are

mostly unseen and impervious to challenge or change. When we believe that these attitudes and assumptions are just “how things are,” we are unable to see anything that might disconfirm what we assume. Trungpa Rinpoche talked about this Tibetan triumphalism a great deal in the early days, saying it often made Tibetan teachers unable to take Westerners seriously or meet them in a way that could be helpful to their ultimate spiritual journeys—or helpful to Tibetan Buddhism, either.

The Tantric Style of Pure Awareness

Trungpa Rinpoche once said to us, “I came here to teach you meditation. I have nothing else to offer.” To me, that simple statement conveys what is most precious about what Tibet has to offer us in the modern world: “the sitting practice of meditation,” as Rinpoche called it. However, Rinpoche was not talking about just any meditation. His own training as a Tibetan *tulku*, or incarnate lama, in what was called “the Practicing Lineage” was in the “Pure Awareness” type of fully embodied meditation that is practiced at the deepest level in the Vajrayana or tantric tradition of Buddhism.

Because I am going to be using the terms “Vajrayana” and “tantra” (or “tantric”) throughout this book, I want to define them for you here. Vajrayana Buddhism is a quite distinctive form of Buddhist tradition emphasizing the sacredness of this world and of our human incarnation. To say again, that is precisely where ultimate reality and final realization are to be found. Vajrayana underscores, as Trungpa did, the critical importance of actual practice and direct experience. It teaches a unique kind of meditation, one that is completely and thoroughly grounded in the body and in ordinary experience. The keynote is on the ultimately transformative power of the practice: “enlightenment in this physical incarnation and in this present life,” as Vajrayana never tires of emphasizing. Or, as in our epigraph, “the great wisdom dwells in the body,” meaning this actual body of ours, right here, right now. “Tantra” refers to a style of spirituality that is found not just in Buddhism but also in Hinduism (Hindu tantra), Jainism (Jain tantra), and in other traditions of the Indian subcontinent and South Asia. We could call the tantric style of spirituality “body-based spirituality.” However, when I use the term, I am always meaning the Buddhist tantra, the specifically Buddhist approach.

In the early days of his time in North America, Rinpoche often talked about

“the meditative state” that he was teaching us to cultivate in our practice. Many of us, aficionados of the “spiritual marketplace,” arrived in his teaching space assuming we knew all about what that was. In American culture then, as now, there was a widespread assumption that spirituality and ordinary human life lie at opposite ends of the spectrum, that spiritual awakening was somehow empty, “pure,” and devoid of content, especially unpleasant content. We imagined some kind of big, vacant space, one having nothing to do with human experience and not particularly relevant to ordinary life. This kind of blank awareness may or may not describe the goal of some traditions, including some within Buddhism, but it certainly was not what Rinpoche was talking about.

Rinpoche said that the tantric or Vajrayana style of Pure Awareness can be seen as having three aspects.¹ The first aspect is *complete openness*. This refers to an experience of the essence of our own mind as timeless, pure, and vast without boundaries or limits. This immeasurable expanse, however, is not devoid or vacant. In fact, secondly, rather than being completely empty in the sense of nothing there, it is part and parcel of this endless field that there is “*something to experience*,” or we could also call it *what there is to experience*. While what that “something” is remains to be seen, it is definitely not experience in the ordinary dualistic sense. Thirdly, that primordial awareness with its inherent “something to experience,” as part of its own essential nature, is responsive. It is not that the utter openness is the real awareness and the “something to experience” and responsiveness are something else. These three are actually one thing, and that one thing is Pure Awareness itself. As Rinpoche explains, we separate these three out conceptually to facilitate our understanding, but in fact that separation is only apparent, for in Pure Awareness there is not even the slightest separation or distinction.

In this teaching, Rinpoche was turning the tables on us. He was saying that any awareness that is defined simply as empty, open, and void is not the real thing. It is fake awareness. It is ego’s version: it is exclusive, factoring out most of our human experience, discounting everything ego finds unpleasant or doesn’t want to relate to. It is the attempt to create some kind of ideal spiritual state with the ego remaining in control and supreme in the process. This is what Rinpoche famously called “spiritual materialism.”

Please think about that for a moment, because it may be really quite different from what you have learned about the purpose or goal of meditation in the past. So what Rinpoche said was, when we rest in the tantric style of Pure Awareness,

we experience an awareness (1) that is boundless, (2) in which there is something to experience, and (3) that is inherently, spontaneously, and infinitely responsive. And it is this tantric style of Pure Awareness that Rinpoche identified as “the fully awakened state.”

Let’s explore these three dimensions of Pure Awareness in a little more detail. The complete openness means that there are no walls or boundaries or limitations in our awareness whatsoever. When we gaze into the fathomless expanse of our own mind, it is like looking into an infinite sky, and you literally can see forever. The only difference is that with this sky, there is no earth below, us in between, or heaven above, no nothing, and there is no color; it is just endless and brilliantly awake. We see that this is all there is, from beginningless time and through unending space. We see that anything else was ever and always an illusion covering over the basic state, the fundamental, ecstatic reality of us, of everything.

The notion that within the awareness there is “something to experience” is perhaps, at this point in our journey, the most difficult to understand. Pure Awareness is empty in the sense that it has no limitations and nothing compromising its utter, immaculate purity. At the same time, this emptiness is not devoid of qualities. To emphasize, these are not what we usually understand, in our dualistic consciousness, as qualities that can be known, named, and defined. They stand completely outside of and beyond the thinking mind. They are known, but not by our dualistic consciousness. An often used analogy is space (the complete openness) that is suffused and illuminated by sunlight (the qualities). In our experience, we can’t say that the space is one thing and the sunlight that illuminates it is something else. We cannot separate out the sunlight as a “thing.” In our experience, it is brilliant, illuminated space that we perceive. I’ll be explaining more about this second aspect as well as offering some further examples shortly.

The third aspect, the inherent responsiveness of Pure Awareness, indicates that it is the very nature of our primordial awareness to freely, spontaneously, and effortlessly respond to what appears. For example, when we perceive the unity of space suffused with sunlight, we might find, as an inherent response to that experience, utter joy. The joy is not an add-on; it is not something that happens after we experience the space suffused with sunlight. That would be an ego response. Rather, that joy is inherent; it is part and parcel of the original experience of space suffused by sunlight, and there is no separation whatsoever between the boundless emptiness and it, along with its qualities. All of this is

happening entirely outside of the realm of our ego mind, even at the most subtle level. Our thinking, judging, discriminating ego consciousness has no part in this whatsoever. It is all happening within the immaculate field of Pure Awareness itself.

Please notice that this tantric style of Pure Awareness is not a mental phenomenon. It is fully somatic and experiential. Enlightenment is found in the body and nowhere else. To put it in blatant terms: enlightenment is a physical experience, although “physical” is defined here as the experience of our body when we are not running it through our labeling, judging, thinking mind. We feel and sense enlightenment; it is a felt sense, not a thought. It feels in our body fresh, light, natural, relaxed, open. This is the bliss of the body that is talked about in the tradition: the sunlit space runs through our veins like liquid light. Tibetan tradition defines this as the “energy of awareness,” or “life-force,” and here we touch it intimately, because it is what we are. This somatic experience of awareness illuminates our bodies with warmth, well-being, and joy, though always as experienced directly, without dualistic objectification, absent any thought process whatsoever. If you want an example to illustrate the intensely somatic nature of authentic realization, take a look at how the Buddha is portrayed in the texts and the iconography. We are told and shown that his person radiated with unearthly beauty, the sweetness of his smile was like the sun rising, one never had enough of seeing him, his skin seemed golden, and the light around him felt almost blinding in its brilliance. The artists behind these portrayals were not only depicting another time and place; they were showing us what it is like when we realize for ourselves, in our bodies, the full measure of our own primordial nature.

PART ONE

The View and Somatic Practice of Pure Awareness

What Is Somatic Meditation?

“THE GREAT WISDOM DWELLS IN the body.” Let us try to understand more fully what this means and what its implications are for our meditation practice. I have written elsewhere, in *The Awakening Body*,¹ about the unique approach of tantric-style somatic meditation and would like to recap some of that discussion here. In brief, most of the contemporary practice of meditation, particularly in the Western world, involves a top-down process. Typically, we approach meditation as a conscious and well-defined project, with specific goals in mind, and then deliberately apply particular techniques in order to bring about the state that we seek. There is nothing wrong with this approach, but, as we shall see, it is quite limited, and from the tantric point of view we are hardly giving ourselves a chance.

In contrast to this, somatic meditation involves a bottom-up process, wherein we connect with the inherent, self-existing wakefulness that is already present within this human body of ours. Somatic meditation develops a meditative consciousness that is accessed through the feelings, sensations, somatic intuitions, and felt senses of the body itself. We are simply trying to tune in to the basic awakened awareness of the body. Put in Vajrayana terms, the human body is already and always abiding in the meditative state, the domain of awakening, and we are just trying to gain entry into that. It is this true, ultimate body of ours that I term “the Soma.” In somatic meditation, then, we realize that the ultimate meditative state is not found outside, above, or in some other place; it is discovered as the most essential and profound experience of this very human body of ours, just waiting for us to awaken to it.²

But why might the somatic approach to meditation be important within the larger field of meditation and all the different types available in the modern

world? Within the classical Asian traditions, meditation is touted, and rightly so, as the supreme method of spiritual growth and human fulfillment. Meditation is said to cultivate unconditioned awareness, our basic nature, and to be the basis of all spiritual change and transformation. And the only appropriate basis for life. So far, so good.

At the same time, though, many of us have experienced the more common, conventional, disembodied types of meditation that tend to predominate in the modern spiritual scene. These tend to emphasize a top-down approach of our prefrontal cortex thinking mind. To elaborate, we have specific concepts about the goal we are seeking, we cling to techniques, and the ego never really cedes control. In spite of occasional, brief visits to the body, throughout the journey we tend to stay up in our heads. Hence, this approach removes us from the gritty, raw, and rugged corporeal realities of our human incarnation; we find ourselves floating around somewhere else, hovering outside and above our human life. Experiencing meditation in this way, many of us wonder, “Can this be true spirituality? Is there not something more inclusive, more real?” As we shall presently see, Gautama Buddha asked exactly this same question two and a half millennia ago.

For me, the answer has been provided by what happened to me in my practice—and perhaps others can relate to this as well. My own experience has been that after years of meditating in the common, disembodied way, I found myself feeling strangely disconnected; my awareness was a bit flat, arid, and static; and the transformation that I sought in the practice was simply not happening. Like many of us, I was glad for a practice that could calm me down and center me when I was upset or lost. But, if I were honest with myself, I was far from the promise of well-being, happiness, and fulfillment that inspired me to take up meditation in the first place. Very far indeed. Somehow something was missing. Over time, probably like many of you, I began to suspect the problem: my body and hence my life had been left out of the process. And so the prospect of meditation grounded in the body seemed worth exploring. Fortunately for me, I had signed on to a tantric lineage that shows how to do this, though these teachings are more a part of the esoteric tradition and not commonly emphasized, especially in the West. Many of us come to body-based meditation, then, because we are already meditators but looking for something deeper, more experiential, and more real.

At the same time, others of us come to Soma-based meditation from quite a different angle. There are some of us who are, from the beginning, body-oriented

people. We may not have had much or even any experience of meditation. However, we appreciate the importance of the body and perhaps have done a great deal of work to come into our body and to be more present to our bodily life. Quite likely, our profession is somatically oriented. Perhaps we are dancers, yoga teachers, bodyworkers, rolfers, Feldenkrais teachers, or practitioners of other of the somatic healing arts. But at a certain point we may notice that we are stuck. We may feel physically pretty good and enjoy considerable health, but we sense we are recycling the same practices, the same experiences, and the same problems. Though we have a good relationship to our body, still, we seem to be governed by the same habitual patterns and the same activations, and we do not seem to be able to get to the root of our problems. Simply doing more yoga, more tai chi, more qigong, or more sessions with our bodyworker doesn't seem to help us through this impasse. Somehow, the most fundamental and core issues that we were hoping to get to through our work with our body still elude us.

In this case, as I have experienced in teaching many folks involved in somatic disciplines, often the missing piece is that we have failed to prioritize the development of unconditional or primordial awareness, which is, actually, the core reality and basic nature of our body—and, in terms of those we may be working with, we have failed to help them develop this very same thing in their own bodies. Since the ultimate experience of our body—of all bodies—is this pristine awareness, we cannot escape a nagging feeling that there is something brewing somewhere down there, something that calls us, but we don't know quite what it is and or how to get to it. For so many of us who get into the somatic disciplines, isn't this what we were looking for in the first place—some kind of ultimacy in our body that we sensed was there? So we may begin to gain some self-recognition here: we have not prioritized the development of the awareness dimension in our somatic work, but we could.

Nearly all modern body-centered practices and therapies that I have experienced (and benefited from), while addressing the conditioned and relative aspects of our disembodiment, do not sufficiently address or perhaps do not address at all the root of our problem. To say again, this is a disconnection from the ultimate, timeless ground of our Soma, the unconditioned awareness that is the most fundamental nature of our incarnation.

Like the meditator who remains mainly in his or her head, if we are already working with our body but not touching this ultimate ground in ourselves and those we work with, we are selling ourselves short. We are missing something that could facilitate our practice and our work, that could further our own most

basic journey, and that could encourage a new depth of integrity as we work with others. To rest in the depths of the Soma in the way I am describing could enable us to be the most complete and impactful yoga teacher, somatic therapist, et cetera possible. In other words, it could unlock and unleash our fullest creativity in our work. And so, sensing this, we may come to somatically oriented meditation as a possible way through our impasse.

Somatic meditation, then, addresses both the meditators looking for something deeper, more grounded, and more real—more transformative—and the somatic practitioners and teachers who feel they are missing the “primordial piece,” so to speak. For the meditator, by calling us back into our body, it lands us in the arena where, alone, the authentic meditative state can be found in all of its fullness, integrity, and glory. And by inviting those of us who already work with our body to prioritize the cultivation of ultimate awareness, it unlocks the fullest possibilities of the work we are doing, opens us to the deepest strata of somatic being, and facilitates the ultimate change we are looking for in ourselves and those we may be trying to help.

Somatic meditation shows us the body that, at the deepest level, we always knew we had but could never quite find. And, most importantly, it shows us how to make contact with that embodied awareness, how to enter it, how to remove the obstacles in our relationship to it, and finally, as I say, how to live from that place. And then our somatic meditation and our somatic disciplines are exponentially more powerful, far more thoroughly healing for ourselves and others; and, frankly, they make ever so much more sense and feel ever so much more complete. You may come to feel that right in your body is the life you have been looking for—in the beautiful words of the I Ching, that you have found your “place within the infinity of being.”³

Pure Awareness Meditation within the Larger Buddhist Context

Let’s look more closely at the somatic, tantric style of Pure Awareness meditation within the larger Buddhist context of the modern world. In what we hear from our various Asian and Western teachers, it might initially appear as if the body is taken as the starting point for practice. In many practices, students are asked to pay attention to their breath or physical sensations as they arise initially and conventionally in our normal experience. The body one begins with, then, is what Trungpa Rinpoche calls “the psychosomatic body,” or “the

conceptualized body.” Please note, this is not the real body of direct experience that is revealed to nonconceptual awareness. It is, rather, the body we *think* we have, experienced through the heavy overlay of our assumptions, concepts, and judgments. In conventional Buddhism, the hope is that, over time, this overlay is gradually dissolved, and that is how you get to the awakened body, your buddha body, within. This is known as the gradual approach, and, depending on how much time we have for meditation, it can be very gradual indeed.

In stark contrast, the tantric style of meditation takes a very different approach. It brings us right away into a direct experience of the true body. The Vajrayana wants to tap us into the body as it truly is, absent the mental overlays. But what exactly is this? How are we to understand it? And how does this experience happen?

A first and most vital point, deserving to be repeated and emphasized over and over, is that we are not approaching our body from the outside as an object to look at, to ponder over, or to think about. We gain access to this true body of ours through the process of what is called “interoception,” or “looking from the inside.” “Interoception” is a neuropsychological term that means we are not viewing the body from the external and nonexperiential standpoint of our judging, thinking, analyzing mind. Rather, we set aside our conceptualizing apparatus and, through various techniques, enter our awareness into our Soma directly, feeling and sensing it from within. In other words, we are able to meet our true body within, but only when our thinking mind has been stilled and we have arrived in an interior field of complete silence.

Through the countless centuries and generations of practitioners of the somatic lineages, many methods have been developed to bring us into that nonconceptual state at the beginning of our journey as meditators. All of these involve some kind of direct experiential contact or event. Most often, this is mediated by a meditation teacher or mentor who can catalyze our experience of what is in question.

In days gone by, the physical presence of this person was considered a necessity. Now, however, as I myself have unexpectedly discovered over the past decades (and after a fair amount of resistance of my own), authentic “pointing out”—for that is what this “showing” is traditionally called—can happen in many ways other than in the immediate physical presence of the teacher. I have found that the awakening within the student implied by “pointing” can occur with great power and authenticity through audio recordings and over the

Internet. Some may be alarmed that I am saying this; and I would be too, except that over and over I have found it to be so.

And now we arrive at an essential, critical aspect of the path of embodied meditation, of our somatic spiritual journey. Likely all of my readers have many ideas about Buddhism, meditation, and spirituality. I do too. What has actually been and remains very shocking to me is that attending to the interior world of the Soma leads us into many experiences, many insights, for which our previous knowledge has not prepared us. In other words: we have our ideas and assumptions even about the subject matter of this book; at the same time, the discoveries we are going to make are very likely going to disrupt many of our expectations and beliefs.

It is okay and even inevitable that you are going to come to this book and the journey I am presenting with a lot of assumptions, expectations, and even a dose of skepticism. My invitation is for you to enter into this unknown world of your Soma fully and completely; and the only way you are going to be able to do that is if you are willing to set aside temporarily all the assumptions, convictions, and expectations. You don't have to try to get rid of them or turn against them, which would be impossible in any case. Just be willing, when something I am saying contradicts what you think or firmly believe or want to believe, to set that aside for a moment and take a look with a fresh perspective, a clear awareness, an uncluttered somatic openness.

Do the practices with an open mind and see where they lead. Leaving your expectations, like so much baggage, at the door may seem easy. But it isn't. It isn't, because probably much that happens from this point forward is going to irk or even irritate you, surprise you, or even occasionally fill you with awe.

And then watch. What happens next is that the old ego, feeling it is losing its conceptual reference points, is likely going to get into the game with all kinds of doubts, insecurities, judgments, and criticisms. And these are going to be coming from your currently existing database of past experience. But taking these too seriously is only going to slow you down and may even hurt you. Please be wary of any tendencies to take yourself out of the somatic journey before we have even gotten started. My reporting my experience that genuine transmission can occur through audio recordings and over the Internet may be the least of what you may find alarming and disquieting in this journey.

As I will discuss below, the Internet and our world of wall-to-wall electronic devices and media provide some of the most challenging obstacles to a life of

embodied meditation in the modern world. At the same time, as I am suggesting here, they can open up undreamed-of possibilities for our journeys. It is really up to us how we engage our electronic world. Taking the wrong approach could harm or destroy us; but if we are intelligent about how we use these tools, they can be an enormous support for our spiritual life.

In this regard, Trungpa Rinpoche used to say, “However much light, that much darkness.” What he meant is that we should remain alert and careful, even slightly paranoid in a positive and healthy way, on the journey. The more we practice and the more sensitive and aware we become, the more we experience a world that is rich, colorful, and magnificent; strangely, at the same time, it is also a world where literally everything can lead us either down into the quicksand of egotism, self-absorption, and neurosis or else upward into the light of sanity, compassion, and realization, depending on how we relate to it. Such is the nature of the spiritual quest in the modern world. He also said that the sooner we come to realize both the light and the darkness, in ourselves as well as in our spiritual work in modernity, the better we will be able to navigate on the endless, stormy seas of samsara and be genuinely helpful to others and, beyond that, to our world.

The Body in Tantric Awareness

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF this body of ours, when we view it directly, through interoception, without obstructing conceptual overlays? What is it like when we make contact with our own true and actual body? What do we find out? What is presented to our direct, immediate perception? The mark of the tantric approach to awareness is to realize the body itself is always and ever abiding in the meditative state or the awakened state. This state of our true body is characterized by the three qualities mentioned earlier: it is unconditionally open; there is “something to experience”; and it is freely responsive. Let’s look at these assertions in a little more depth.

Complete Openness

To begin with, and most fundamentally, we discover that this body of ours, when we really feel into it, is unconditionally open, empty, and vast. We sense and experience this for ourselves at the deepest somatic level. As the tantra says, enlightenment is found—is felt—in the body. It is a deeply felt bodily experience. Far from being disembodied or dissociative, this is experienced as much more embodied than our normal, everyday experience of having a body.

“Unconditionally” here means that, through our interoception, we come upon a body, our very own body, that in the self-evident experience of direct perception is seen to be always and limitlessly open. We see for ourselves that nothing that ever happens can impede or harm its openness and unobstructed emptiness. I call this an experience of “the ultimate Soma.” I cannot emphasize enough: this can be, and must be, a direct personal experience, just like looking up on a clear day and realizing, “Oh, the sky is blue”—it is that literal. In this

direct experience, we see that this fundamental nature of our Soma, our “true nature” as it is also called, never had a beginning and will never end.

Again, this realization is present in our direct experience, right up front. It is not something we have to sit around and think about. The experience is self-authenticating; unless, of course, your conceptual mind gets in the way and begins creating reservations, doubts, criticisms, and other such negative thinking. In your interoception, please leave these aside; you will have plenty of time to think it all through later. My intention is that through the guided practices offered in this book, you will come to have some direct, experiential understanding of this for yourself.

“Something to Experience” or “What There Is to Experience”

The second experiential dimension of our true and actual body is that within the immaculate silence of our ultimate Soma, we discover there is “something to experience” that is part and parcel of the openness, in no way separate or distinct from it. So far, in referring to this “something to experience,” I have said only that it has nothing to do with our normal idea of dualistic “experience”—the notion of us having a separate self that perceives other things in a dualistic, self-and-other way, that sees other things as apart from us to be understood through the activities of our conceptual thinking (by labeling, categorizing, and so forth).

Buddhism, especially in the meditative traditions, has tried throughout its history to find ways to communicate to us that enlightenment is not a “blank,” that it involves a certain actual experience of the world, but that this experience is not what we might ordinarily think. But how to convey to us ordinary people an experience that occurs within and does not depart from the vastness of the fully realized state? Many possible approaches to the challenge of trying to wake us up in this way have been developed and deployed, and in this book I am going to talk to you about some of them.

One of the earliest and most enduring teachings in this regard has been what Thich Nhat Hanh calls the teaching of “interbeing.” It goes like this. We as physically embodied beings are already in connection and intimate relationship with everything that is. This teaching obviously contradicts most of our ordinary experience of ourselves as separate and more or less disconnected from everything else. However, modern science certainly confirms that our bodies, our selves, and our lives are infinitely porous and permeable to the entire

universe “outside.” Moreover, what goes on within us is the result of the totality of causes and conditions in the “external world” in which we live. And this applies down to the atoms and even the electrons that are the physical basis of “us.” Now, that is a mind-blowing discovery. In short, everything we are is connected with everything that is. You really cannot say where this body and this self begins or ends. In this sense, from a scientific point of view, there is no separate body or separate self; we are literally an instance, an embodiment, of the entire universe we live in.

Scientists, of course, approach interbeing from the outside and describe it on the basis of theoretical models that are confirmed or disconfirmed by experiments. Interbeing as depicted by the scientific model may be shocking enough. However, when we look deeply within our Soma through interoception and we experience this interbeing for ourselves—when we see that this vast, interconnected web of causes and conditions is ultimately what our state of being is, with nothing separate, most of all our “self”—now, *that* is really mind-altering and spiritually transformative. In fact, when we come upon this truth as a matter of direct, naked experience, this is said to coincide with exactly what the Buddha realized on the night of his enlightenment. In other words, to understand interbeing fully as a personal, unadorned experience corresponds with realization or, in Buddhist terms, enlightenment.

Why is this so? How can it be so? No molecule, no atom, not even one electron in us exists independent of the infinite web of causes and conditions that produced it and that sustain it. Please contemplate how radical this proposition is. This means that everything we habitually define as “me” is simply the product of a multitude of causes and conditions: our particular karmic situation that we identify as “mine”; my particular history, upbringing, friends, enemies, what I feel, the emotions that arise, even the thoughts that I have. Nothing exists except as a product of the totality of what is. Nothing has any independent existence.

But what about my idea that I exist as a separate, somewhat autonomous person? That I am a more or less free agent—within limitations, of course—in charge of my life? Buddhism says that even the idea of a separate self is itself a product of an infinite variety of causes and conditions. Much as we love and cherish and want to protect our precious “me,” in fact what we are cherishing is just another idea that itself is the product of other things. It is a figment of our imagination to which we fiercely cling. People hate others and even kill them when they threaten this “self” idea of ours.

As we shall see, the human ego itself, our whole idea of a separate “me,” is an extraordinarily subtle and complex defense mechanism against something ever so simple: the pain, anxiety, and fear that we, along with all other mammals and all forms of life, feel in the face of our vulnerability, the fragile nature of being alive. All life wants to live, but it lives under the shadow of frailty and lack of control. Watch squirrels in the mountains in autumn, how frenetically they bolt around searching for enough food for the winter. We humans also feel our fragility but have found ways to basically render ourselves ignorant of this fact. We check out, having learned to exit from the actual experience of life and instead inhabit the enclosed, disconnected, delusional world of our left brain.¹ There we can cycle and recycle our concepts, wrap ourselves up in wishful fantasizing, and, at the same time, remain insentient to our actual situation.

In the moment of awakening, however, we realize, as the Buddhist texts say, that there is no “self” as a reality. *We see that “we” do not exist.* If you have ever experienced the terror of possible annihilation, try this: you can look from the top of the universe to the bottom, and you will never find your “self.” We see that the “me” that we had thought to have some existence is nothing more than an idea; it is a figment our imagination conjured up because we are terrified of the pain of realizing the actual situation. There is no separate “me”; there is no “self.” So yes, for ordinary beings, a terrifying insight. However, when we approach this experience in the right way, then the realization becomes enormously liberating.

Strange and paradoxical as it may seem, as we deepen into our realization of interbeing, we begin to see that even the “things” making up the infinite web of what is are themselves not existent in any substantial sense. There is no substance anywhere. An analogy might be the string theory in quantum mechanics, which proposes, in one of its iterations, that there is no matter anywhere in the universe. Even the supposed building blocks of nature, the subatomic particles that make up atoms, are themselves ultimately nothing more or less than energy. The appearance of anything solid or substantial is an illusion.

So “interbeing” is one way of talking about “something to experience” or “what there is to experience.” It is something sensed, felt, and realized within the openness of the Soma. It can occur only within the infinite silence of our deepest Soma; it is not anything we can think about, label, or pin down in any way, because there is no “thing” to conceptualize or isolate so we can think about it.

This realization of “something to experience” is at once both an experience of

the infinite space of our basic nature and inseparable from it. Interbeing is ultimately a way of talking about the energy of awareness. Within it, as within the string theory in the quantum universe, there is no materiality whatsoever. There is the energy of awareness and nothing more.

In these pages, I hope to provide you with an opportunity to see for yourself—and, again, this must be a matter of personal experience—that you are and always have been within an infinite web of connection and relationality. And *that*, rather than this paltry, petty ego thing, is who we actually are. Who we now see ourselves to be as an embodied person cannot be cordoned off or sequestered. We now know within our body that who we are, as a person, is ultimately defined *only* by the Totality, in connection and even communion with all the beings in all the realms. In a very real sense, we now realize that, most fundamentally, this Soma of ours is our essential person in its fullest dimensions, nothing short of the Totality itself. There is no room, nor is there any need, for a separate “self.”

Freely Responsive

The third dimension of our true and actual body is responsiveness. Within the immaculate mirror of our completely open somatic awareness, we feel “something to experience”—our interconnection, our intimate relationality with the endless web of what is. And then, within that open field and its energy of awareness, there is something further. We might say, “Our heart leaps.” It is that natural, effortless, and spontaneous. We discover a refined, indeed infinite, sensitivity and feeling in our body. There is a lively, dynamic, creative somatic responsiveness in ourselves, a natural imperative to respond. Respond to what? To what has arisen in the mirror of our Soma. This responsiveness has nothing to do with our small, centralized ego; it is entirely without agenda or strategy. It is just how our body responds, just as when we are holding a newborn or when our beloved touches our arm. This responsiveness is immediate and precedes any kind of thinking by about a million miles.

Many of you have likely experienced moments of one or all three of the aforementioned aspects of tantric-style awareness in the course of meditation or daily life. This would not be surprising, since, as I will be saying throughout this book, they do represent our basic and ultimate bodily condition and are present always, beneath the heavy, suffocating overlay of discursive thought. What the

tantric approach to somatic awareness offers us is the opportunity to learn how to stay continuously connected with that primordial and fully embodied state of being.

Pure Awareness and Traditional Tibetan Vajrayana

AT THIS POINT, I WOULD like to say a little more about the traditional Tibetan tantric approach to Pure Awareness, especially for those having some familiarity with Tibetan Buddhism and also to further clarify what we are doing here. In Tibetan tradition, there are two complementary approaches to the realization of the tantric style of Pure Awareness, both considered necessary.

First, there is the approach of “form practices.” These involve visualizations, iconography, prayers, offerings, and, often, detailed rituals. Since the different Tibetan lineages each have their own versions—and typically many versions—of these, this aspect of Tibetan Buddhism can be confusing and overwhelming for modern people.

Second, there is the approach of the “formless practices,” which are based on working directly with the complete openness of awareness and the other two dimensions of Pure Awareness discussed in the previous chapter. The form practices are considered to be preparations and stepping stones to the direct realizations that are the focus of formless practices. Generally, it is considered necessary to carry out the form practices first, because they prepare your body in a certain way, before the formless practices can be engaged with any hope of success. And even after you are practicing primarily the formless practices, you still have to stay grounded in the form practices—meaning in your body—and continue to do them.

Practitioners in the modern world may be deeply inspired by the tantric style of Pure Awareness. But, understandably, they are often completely put off by the seemingly arcane and incredibly complex liturgies and rituals of the form practices. So naturally many ask, “Can we just skip the form practices? Can we move directly to the formless practices? If we bypass the form practices, can we

still anticipate the possibility of full tantric-style realization?”

Many practitioners, in fact, have tried and do try to pursue this avenue. But if we don't include the body in the beginning, what we end up with is a realization that excludes the body. In other words, we wind up with, I am sorry to say, a disembodied understanding of meditation. This produces a disconnected realization of complete openness, lacking the other two necessary dimensions of Pure Awareness. The outcome of skipping the form practices is not the embodied tantric style of realization but rather, as Trungpa Rinpoche said, a fake openness, a disembodied openness—in his terms, “spiritual materialism.” But where does that leave us? If we are truly desirous of pursuing the tantric style of authentic awakening, do we then have to just grit our teeth and force ourselves to engage in practices that seem so unfamiliar and foreign and, frankly, irrelevant to our lives? Or is there another way to prepare the body for the formless, one that not only is eminently accessible but also makes complete sense in our modern, secular world and has an immediate resonance with the authentic human life we are trying to live?

The answer is, “Yes!” This is what I am doing when I am showing you how to gain access to the unconditioned, unborn dimension of your being or Soma through the conditioned, born dimension of your ordinary human body. Whereas the Tibetans make their approach through their liturgies and rituals, we are approaching Pure Awareness through the secular, somatic gate of developing a simple, but ever-deepening, bodily awareness.

But here is the essential point: the process and the outcome are the same. I myself know this for a fact, because I have spent decades exploring each of these two gates. And I have also seen the results in the people I am training.

In fact, my experience has led me to believe that the gate of the body work that I teach is, in general, often more effective for most people in the modern world for two reasons. First, the ancient ritualistic gate presents so many unnecessary obstacles and confusions for contemporary practitioners and is often tied up with Tibetan mores and customs. Second—and this is a crucial point—most Vajrayana practitioners I know misunderstand the form practices as essentially mental exercises wherein they are supposed to imagine things that don't actually exist and to conjure up make-believe realities. They do not realize that the form practices are all about their bodies.

The Classical Tibetan Form Practices

I would like to illustrate what I am saying by talking a little about traditional Tibetan visualizations, iconography, and rituals. I reiterate: the traditional Tibetan form practices are entirely concerned with preparing our body. This is what tantra is all about, and this somatic emphasis is what makes it unique among Buddhist traditions and so important for us in our world.

Let's take a look at the stages of the classical process. In step one, the practitioner is gradually led into the depth of the body, what I am calling the primordial body of the Soma. Through a set of four ritual practices known as the "preliminary practices," or *ngöndro*, the practitioner trains to release all external, mentally constructed ideas, judgments, and preconceptions about his or her body. You may have heard about these: they include 108,000 repetitions each of prostrations, Vajrasattva practice, mandala offering, and guru yoga.

Briefly, in prostrations, you are throwing yourself on the ground, prostrating, over and over, visualizing in front of you a deity representing your own awakened nature. The intensely physical nature of the practice brings you more and more deeply into a full somatic experience, and your thinking mind begins to recede. To do the practice, you really have to let go, over and over, of your thinking mind. And as you do this, sometimes, abruptly, you have a glimpse of your true Soma.

In Vajrasattva practice, you visualize Vajrasattva, the buddha of purification, on top of your head. You feel your body and, on your head, feel the presence of Vajrasattva, who represents your own complete openness and the other two dimensions of Pure Awareness. You visualize the luminous energy of primordial awareness flowing from Vajrasattva down through your body, washing away all of your concepts. You visualize all those concepts dissolving into the earth below. Doing this over and over, you begin to glimpse your primordial Soma, which is experienced as light, embodying the three aspects of Pure Awareness.

In the mandala offering, you visualize yourself giving away everything in your world, everything you are attached to that pulls you out of your Soma, all the external projections, all the concepts, judgments, and all your neurotic emotions such as aggression, jealousy, pride, neediness, and anxiety that cause you to disembodify. Through this practice, eventually, in glimpses, you find yourself left only with your naked somatic being, its complete openness, "what there is to experience," and its spontaneous responsiveness.

In guru yoga, you visualize your teacher in an idealized form on top of your head holding the Vajrayana teachings and blessings, and you find your body now

—again, in glimpses—open to receiving these.

In the ngöndro, these visualizations begin as imaginary; they are indeed made-up things. But if the practices are performed as intended, not just as purely mental exercises, they land us in a deeply embodied state, with much less standing between us and the Pure Awareness of our ultimate Soma. Keep in mind also that in speaking of the ngöndro, I am referring to glimpses rather than any kind of full realization. This is because these practices really are laying the ground for what will come later and there can be, at this stage, no question of full somatic awakening. For that, we will need the formless practices; however, the ngöndro enable us to take the first step. To be fair, if the ngöndro are practiced as exercises of the imagination alone, this is not necessarily just our fault as modern practitioners. Often, they are taught that way by our teachers.

Yidam: The Deity Practice

Now the practitioner is ready to take up the main somatic Vajrayana practice, the practice of the *yidam*, or, as it is sometimes called, “deity practice.” It is here that we are going to be given a practice to inhabit our actual body, our Soma, in a more-than-glimpse-wise fashion.

In Indian and Tibetan Vajrayana, this true body of ours is called the “yidam” or “tutelary” or “guardian deity.” But here is the key point; the yidam is not a deity in the sense of something other or outside; this is not a theistic approach. *The yidam is not anything other than our own ultimate body.* So that is interesting: what is being said here is that our ultimate Soma is our guardian and our protector. The Soma is labeled a “deity” in classical Vajrayana so that nobody confuses this awakened body with his or her conventional, ego-driven concept of the body. In other words, to say again, what is called the “yidam” in Tibet is nothing other than our true Soma.

Unfortunately, it is all too common in the practice of Vajrayana in the modern world, notably by Western converts, to think that the yidam is just some kind of made-up fantasy. But if we think the yidam is just a creation of our imagination, an idea we are supposed to superimpose onto our actual person and life, we will miss the whole point of the practice. Then there will be no real experience involving everything we are, no deep journey, no change, and no realization at all.

The actual somatic state of affairs about the yidam visualization was made

quite clear by one of my primary Mahamudra teachers, the Venerable Thrangu Rinpoche. One time he said, in essence, “If you think the yidam is just your imagination, think again. Don’t go there. The yidam is actually the true nature of your presently existing being; you just don’t know it. It’s what is going on underneath. You just need to shed enough of your conventional, samsaric ideas about yourself to see it.” He went on to state that the point of Vajrayana practice is just to wake up to that fact; in other words, to know and experience directly and nakedly, for ourselves, that our true body, our actual physical state of being, is nothing other than what is called the sacred presence, the yidam, or, in our language, the Soma.

If we look briefly at the stages of our own unfolding journey with the somatic practices, we will see how they are the same process that, ideally, happens in the traditional ritualized Tibetan Vajrayana journey. First is connecting profoundly and somatically with the fundamental reality of our body when viewed through interoception. When we do this, we begin to discover a vast experiential space in the body. That is known in Vajrayana as “the empty body,” which simply means our ability to contact our body while devoid or empty of thinking. A great deal of our work below will consist of making contact with this utterly open aspect of our Soma—complete openness. In Tibetan tradition this is called the Dharmakaya (“ultimate body”) aspect.

Then, within that vast open ground, there appears all of the relative experience of being human that we previously thought of as our ordinary experience: our sense perceptions, attitudes, feelings, emotions, thoughts, mental images—all of it—and the entire cosmos of external reality. All of our familiar experience arises just as before and now a great deal more besides because we are so open.

Importantly, because all of it is seen from within the vast space of our most fundamental nature—from within the egoless state of complete openness (the Dharmakaya)—this is actually very different from ordinary experience. It comes into view completely outside of our labeling, conceptualizing, judging mind —“something to experience.” Recall that it is the thinking mind that tries to pin our experience down conceptually and make it definable, solid, and real. Now that that is not occurring—we are touching complete openness—all of our previously seeming solid experience reappears as nonsolid, indefinable, and, from the ego’s point of view, unlocatable, ungraspable, and unreal. Instead, everything appears elusive, transparent, translucent, and alive. We will be working toward this throughout the journey offered here. In traditional Tibetan Buddhism, this “something to experience” is called the Sambhogakaya, the

“Body of Great Joy.” This may be termed “what the yidam knows.”

Finally—and again we are drawing parallels with the traditional Tibetan tantric language—within this realm of complete openness and nonconceptual, naked experience, there arises a continual stream of spontaneous responses that have nothing to do with ego agendas or ambition; they are felt as internal, sacred, somatic imperatives. And these have to do with how we may be in the world in a way that is entirely aligned with and expressive of how we now experience ourselves. This the third aspect of Pure Awareness, freely responsive. It is traditionally known as the Nirmanakaya, the “Pure, Incarnational Body,” the great compassion of the awakened state.

Please notice these are all called *kaya*, meaning “body.” In the modern practice of Buddhism, just to say yet one more time, it is often thought that these three kayas, or “bodies of the Buddha,” really have nothing to do with our present, immediate body, that they are somehow realities out there somewhere and have no more than a theoretical importance. However, what I want to suggest is that when the Vajrayana uses the term “kaya,” or “body,” it is doing so deliberately and with great intent. If the Buddha’s realization (the three kayas) really had no point of contact with our body and had nothing to do with it, it would have used a different term. I want to propose that we really need to take what the Vajrayana is saying at face value, rather than reinterpreting it to mean something else just to make it easy on ourselves. How pointless and self-defeating—and in the end how disrespectful and, frankly, shameful—to tell this tradition it doesn’t really mean what it is very clearly, obviously, and literally saying.

An additional key point is this: “kaya” does not mean the mundane body of our unexamined experience. It is not the “mentally constructed body” Trungpa Rinpoche was talking about. The ordinary, conceptualized body is known in Sanskrit as *sharira*; it’s a different word. “Kaya” is an honorific term used for the somatic being of the Buddha or other realized person. It refers to what I am calling here the Soma. “Soma” and “kaya,” then, are equivalents. In fact, one reason I am using the term “Soma” rather than “body” is to try to ensure, as the ancient Buddhists did, that you don’t think I am talking about the conventional body as we habitually experience it.

The Final Stage

There is a final stage, beyond classical yidam practice, that is considered its fruition and that also corresponds to what I am teaching you here. Yidam practice—and the same can be said of our practice with the Soma—is evolved within a container: namely, the envelope of our skin. At a certain point, the boundaries of that container are released; they are shattered and abandoned. To take this final step, the traditional Tibetan practitioners have to let go of their preoccupation with the yidam, and we, likewise, will need to let go of our preoccupation with the specific experiences of our Soma that we have accumulated so far. And then we will find ourselves all at once abiding everywhere and nowhere. Our body is now experienced as boundless and identified with all that is or ever could be. Again, our Soma turns out ultimately to be nothing other than the Soma of the Totality. This is a realization that is well-known in the ancient Chan, Seon, and Zen traditions. Dogen sums it up beautifully:

*To study the way with body means to study the way with your own body. It is the study of the way using this lump of red flesh. The body comes forth from the study of the way. Everything that comes forth from the study of the way is the true human body. The entire world of the ten directions is nothing but the true human body. The coming and going of birth and death is the true human body.*¹

There continue, of course, to be Western students who pursue the traditional practices of ngöndro and yidam, usually under the guidance of a Tibetan teacher. As I say, initially, there may be a tendency to carry out these meditations as purely mental exercises. In my teaching, I have the opportunity to work with quite a few of these practitioners. Strikingly and quite significantly, if they follow the suggestion to go back to the beginning and make the journey into embodiment, they discover the deeper, far more embodied meaning of the traditional practices. At that point, they know for themselves what all those Tibetan yogis and yoginis have been doing up in their remote mountain retreats over the centuries. Then the traditional Tibetan practices, arduous and complex as they may be, are no longer about something imaginary or something from another time and place, but rather about discovering their own human body as nothing other than the three kayas of the Buddha. This is, in fact, how it goes in our own Dharma Ocean community, where many folks are deeply inspired by the classical Vajrayana training and are pursuing it—but now as an embodied journey into the unique reality of their own incarnation.

Pure Awareness and Traditional Shamatha (Mindfulness) and Vipashyana (Awareness)

LET'S LOOK A LITTLE MORE closely at the meaning of Pure Awareness as a genre of Buddhist meditation. Both of the words in the term “Pure Awareness” are important, with very specific and experientially precise tantric meanings. “Pure” refers to what is called elsewhere *shamatha*, “stilling of the mind”; “Awareness” refers to what is generally termed *vipashyana*, “extraordinary insight.”

Shamatha is what we hear about today as “mindfulness” practice; it involves intentionally bringing one’s attention to a particular object, usually the breath at the verge of the nostrils, and holding it on that. Sometimes, we need to apply a great deal of effort to keep our attention on our breath for any period of time. What we are trying to do is counteract the frequently stupefying volume and intensity of our thinking mind. Our thoughts just keep pulling our attention away from the breath. This kind of shamatha or mindfulness can feel like an uphill battle, for often we are initially overwhelmed by the distracting force of our thoughts. However, if performed with intelligence, sensitivity, and persistence, shamatha will eventually lead to a lessening of our usual rampant, compulsive thinking and bring us into a state of relative peace.

And then something happens within that state of peace, as a natural consequence of the relative emptiness and openness—the availability, really—of our conscious mind. If we are receptive to it and not too fixated on our shamatha project, there can then arise vipashyana. This is the extraordinary insight that appears spontaneously and releases our consciousness to a much larger, less subjective and self-centered field of experience. This breakthrough represents the first glimmerings of what Buddhism means by “egolessness.” You are just

not so trapped in your own self-absorbed version of things. In all forms of Buddhism, shamatha is not an end in itself; it is only the preparation. The real point of meditation is vipashyana. Shamatha without vipashyana is, from the traditional point of view, pointless.

The practice of Pure Awareness taught here, which emphasizes the inseparability of mindfulness and awareness, is rooted in the Tibetan traditions of Mahamudra and Dzogchen. In the Indian Vajrayana, this union of the still mind and the aware mind is called *yuganaddha*, “union”; in Tibet, it is termed *zung ’jug*. This inseparability is also found in variations in other awareness traditions of Asia, especially in Chan Buddhism, where it is called *mozhao*, and in Zen, where it is termed *shikantaza*. What is important in these traditions is that shamatha and vipashyana cannot be separated because, essentially, they aren’t separate. We separate them conceptually in order to understand what is going on and to approach the desired meditative state, step by step. However, if you pursue mindfulness into its full depth, you arrive at vipashyana; you can’t help it. And if you try to practice vipashyana without mindfulness, you will be too distracted and won’t be able to.

The various traditions have different ways of making this point. The Japanese term “shikantaza,” though generally translated as “just sitting,” in fact refers to this inseparability. *Shi* refers to shamatha, *kan* refers to vipashyana, *ta* means “being,” and *za*, “just there.” This term in fact wants to show us the inseparability of mindfulness (shamatha) and awareness (vipashyana). When we have fully abandoned our discursive thinking, we enter into a state of profound openness; in that state of profound openness, with no discursive interference, vipashyana, liberating insight, is naturally right there. At the moment of vipashyana, you are in a state of peace and completely present (shamatha). And when you arrive there, in Shunryu Suzuki Roshi’s words, “you are buddha.”

In contemporary Chan Buddhism, the practice of *mozhao* has been rendered by Master Sheng Yen (1930–2009) in the beautifully evocative English phrase “Silent Illumination.” The “silent” part is fully attained shamatha. The “illumination” part refers to what comes into view within the utter silence. “Illumination” evokes the quality of vipashyana experience: it is vivid and bright, and the world appears as if illuminated from its own side. As the Mahaparinirvana Sutra, a Mahayana text with great influence in East Asia, puts it, when mindfulness and awareness are united, the world is seen to be in a state of perpetual illumination.

What all of this means is that if we are going to practice Pure Awareness, the accomplishment of shamatha at a deep level will be necessary. But how are we going to do that? In this regard, mindfulness in contemporary practice has some serious limitations. Briefly, as already mentioned, we are using our left-brain, conceptualizing and managerial thinking mind to try to quiet our left-brain, conceptualizing and managerial thinking mind. In other words, we are using one set of thoughts—“I need to calm down my thinking mind” (a thought), “I need to attain this desired goal” (another concept), and “Here is the strategy I am going to use” (a managerial thought)—to attempt to subdue another set of thoughts.

This sets up a struggle between one set of thoughts and another. The technique does produce some results: by focusing on the breath and trying to hold ourselves there, after a certain time our frenetic, nonstop thinking will begin to slow down, and we will experience relative peace. This is a good thing with many benefits. However, at least according to the Tibetan approach, there is a tension in this “peace.” We are holding to it as the desired state we are pursuing (a concept), and we are trying to keep out of our awareness the other, rampant, disturbing kinds of thoughts. In doing this, we are heightening our conscious awareness, making it more forceful and bright and, frankly, more in control of our mind. It is interesting that in this kind of mindfulness practice, brain scans show the activation of the left prefrontal cortex, the seat of our thinking, ego mind.

In the Tibetan Pure Awareness tradition, this sort of mindfulness, called “constructed mindfulness,” is not considered a bad thing. In fact, it is seen as an important and useful first step in the development of another, much deeper kind of mindfulness, termed “unconstructed” or “inherent” mindfulness. In contrast to constructed mindfulness, which puts one part of the thinking mind in the service of stilling another, more problematic part of the thinking mind, unconstructed mindfulness takes an entirely different approach. As mentioned above, it provides an avenue for us to drop under the left brain into the subcortical regions of the Soma. In order to do so, we have to cede the watchfulness, the self-conscious vigilance, and the control of conscious awareness; we have to enter into the somatic senses, feelings, and intuitions of the body. We come upon them as just there, for themselves, independent and free of our conscious control.

When we do this, as we are about to see, we arrive in a space that is inherently and absolutely peaceful. In this peace there is no tension, nor can there be any, because there is nothing to oppose it. It exists in its own way and on its own behalf; it is the self-existing state of our deepest somatic awareness. Here, we get

to touch the essence of peace itself, the primordial peace of the buddhas. Without this complete, immaculate peace, the tantric-style Pure Awareness is not accessible. But with it, then the awareness is already naturally and effortlessly there: the ultimate, essential union of shamatha and vipashyana.

PART TWO

The Pernicious Ego

Impulse and the Formation of Ego

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND THE somatic practice of Pure Awareness and what it is trying to accomplish, let us begin by considering our Soma in relation to what Buddhism calls “atman,” our small or ego self. In the tantric teaching, as we have seen, our true body, our Soma, ever and always abides in a state of complete openness, the naked or ineffable experience that arises within that (“what is there to be experienced”), and a finely tuned responsiveness to our life and our world. In short, it abides in a state of awakening, for this is its basic nature.

At the same time, as we have also seen, our habitual human mode is to live in separation from the inner enlightenment of our true body. This disconnection is not only ironic but tragic, for our Soma already embodies the very realization, fulfillment, and wholeness that we—not just as spiritual practitioners but simply as humans—are always desperately longing for and seeking.

In fact, the Tibetan teachings say over and over that everything we do in our lives—the wild cravings, the seeming random actions, the craziness, and even the self-destructive behaviors—are all efforts, however misguided, to reconnect with our basic being. What is so deeply sad is that we are looking for the right thing always, but we usually don’t have the slightest idea where to find it.

We try and try, but our basic human malaise—our disconnection—just goes on and on. Yet most of us feel we cannot and we will not give up striving, over and over, to win the big poker game of the universe. We may dimly sense that this particular poker game cannot be won, for it is rigged against us from the beginning: after all, we are conditioned, unfree, and mortal. But we won’t really face this, we won’t give in, and we won’t give up. And so we struggle endlessly.

However, perhaps we are fortunate enough to play through our entire hand and come up empty. We played the last card and here we are, having lost again. We see that playing on and on is not going to solve our basic problem of feeling on some level always at odds with ourselves, our life, our world; that whatever “it” is, it is not working. And somehow, at least some have the intelligence, the honesty, the integrity—and the grit—*not to push this critical realization away*. Somehow they find the bravery to stick it out and see what comes next.

And what comes next, so very often, is exactly what many of us fear: hopelessness, depression, and even despair. The dark night of the soul, so well-known in other authentic spiritual traditions. Although extraordinarily painful and even frightening, this insight is perhaps the most important moment of our entire spiritual journey, because we are actually seeing clearly how things are with us, possibly for the first time. Abruptly we are stripped of our naïve belief—our wishful thinking—that our customary ego approach, with its constant posturing, manipulating, and attempts to control reality, is going to get us anywhere.

At this point, it wouldn’t be all that unusual to have thoughts of suicide flash through our mind. “Okay, what I have been trying to pull off isn’t working and isn’t going to work. I can clearly see that. The life that I envisioned for myself is not an option.” It is not quite that we are quitting; it is that something in us has already died. At such a moment, we can feel very, very dark.

When I was around twenty, all of this hit me, the result of wandering around Asia by myself for a year, being not just inspired but also horrified by what I saw. I became deathly ill. I went to see the world, but what I ended up seeing was the reality of my own situation. When I returned to the United States, I felt that my previous identity was bogus and that I had lost all control over my life and my mind; and I found myself in a state of more or less continual excruciating hopelessness and black depression. This went on for about eight years. At that time, my only consoling thought was, “Well, if this gets too much worse, at least I can always kill myself.” The solace provided by this thought reminds me of a woman I heard about who, dying of cancer and in very great pain, insisted on keeping a loaded revolver in her bedside table, in case her suffering passed beyond what she could endure. Though she never used it, it brought her some comfort. The thought of suicide was my revolver. As I have learned through my teaching, this moment in our journeys of realizing our ego games aren’t going to work is truly game changing and not infrequently leads to such thinking. I am not recommending that we all sit around and fantasize about

killing ourselves, but I am saying that this absolute existential dead end happens, especially among spiritual practitioners; and when it does, we need to understand what is going on and realize that, while it is the end of the world in one sense, in another way it may not be.

Meditation as Another Way

Life wants to live. It is our nature as living beings always to want to be, to exist, to survive, to continue. And so, no matter how deep the darkness, we may well have a question hovering somewhere in our consciousness: is there another way? At this point the thought of meditation might come up as something to look into. I am not talking here about meditation as a lifestyle choice or as some kind of new technique that the ego can use to make its own thing work better. I am talking about meditation as a method we might consider in a moment of desperation by which to look deeply into our experience, without any other agenda than to find out what the hell is going on with us; as a practice with which to dig down underneath the incessant thinking, evaluating, judging, wishing, strategizing, and manipulating to see what else, if anything, might be there. And so, if we find connection to a tantric lineage, we are invited to enter the somatic realm. In tantra this is the supreme gate to the understanding we are seeking and, in fact, the only one. We may feel inspired to look into our body and its experience because, frankly, what else do we have right now?

We enter into the practice of Pure Awareness with the invitation and the compelling prospect of tapping into our Soma and discovering what lies within that field. However, as our bodily awareness begins to develop, as we try to remain within that awareness, we find ourselves running into an obstacle. We immediately encounter an almost irresistible tendency to separate and disembodify; we see how quickly and how often we flee from the direct, naked, nonconceptual experience of our body into our thinking mind. What is going on here? It is quite puzzling. We are beginning to discover the wonders of our embodied awareness, along with its openness and freedom, so why do we find it so difficult to stay present with it?

Let's reflect on this for a moment. By nature, not just as humans but as mammals and as life forms, we are pleasure seekers. Even one-celled organisms seek pleasure in their own way. All of us, from the smallest beings to the largest, from the simplest to the most complex, seek to live; and, though we humans

often distort the process of pleasure seeking, pleasure is nature's way of telling us that we are heading in the right direction and drawing closer to greater life. Thus, we humans are constantly seeking the good feelings of satisfaction, security, comfort, safety, happiness, satiety. And we try our best to avoid hunger, thirst, physical pain, insecurity, emotional suffering, danger. Some religious traditions denounce and condemn this pleasure seeking, equating it with sin; but, really, let's not get too down on ourselves. This tendency is fundamental to our own nature as living beings, essential to all living creatures, and part of the sacredness of life itself.

As mammals and, moreover, as primates of the human type, our pleasure seeking is quite sophisticated. We are not talking about bananas here; we are talking about gourmet meals in Michelin three-star restaurants. We seek not only good food, physical comfort, memorable sex, blissful physical well-being, and a peaceful and beautiful place to live but also the pleasure of wealth and other resources that will reassure us about tomorrow; a place in society with status and power; ideas that help us make sense of our fragile, uncertain existence; states of mind that are free of uncertainty and anxiety...and the list continues. But there is something else in the way of pleasure that we seek above all: an idea or image of ourselves, an ego concept, that feels successful—solid, reliable, valued, and positive. Making positive sense of ourselves and carrying a measure of self-esteem are highly desired commodities for all of us.

Here is the critical point: we associate the opposite of pleasure—namely, pain and discomfort—with threat, possible harm, and death. We want to avoid pain at all costs, even if the only way to do so is to block it out of our conscious awareness. And that approach, the approach of repressing unwanted and unwelcome experience into our unconscious, our body, is the default mode of the human person. We tend to go into a state of denial, profound ignorance, and disembodied disconnection from what is going on for us.

The awareness of the Soma is, as I've suggested, open and undefended; in fact, it is without boundaries, potentially limitless. The Soma just receives and flawlessly knows what is. That is what enlightenment means in the Vajrayana. But we humans have a big problem with our Soma, precisely because it is fully, unreservedly, and objectively cognizant of all the pain, fear, uncertainty, ambiguity, contradiction, and messages of vulnerability that run through our lives. And of course, this kind of information is always threatening to disconfirm the solid ego concept we are always trying to build up and fortify. So we set ourselves dead against it and negate, control, and suppress the Soma.

As any meditation practitioner knows, the human tendency to turn away from unpleasant, disquieting, or threatening experience shows up big-time when we try to meditate. Sitting there on our meditation cushion, whenever anything dicey comes up, we tend to exit from our bodily awareness into our left-brain thinking mode. We shrink away, going back to our “technique” or conjuring up ideas of peace and clarity—anything that will distract us from what is right here; and what is right here, we push out of our awareness. Not surprisingly, we also do this throughout our daily life. Anytime something arrives that we find threatening, our reactivity is abrupt and instantaneous, so much so that most of the time we are not even aware of it; it ordinarily occurs below the threshold of consciousness. One second, we are present and somatically accounted for; the next, we have fled into some disconnected mental realm of our own choosing. When we sit down to engage in our meditation, whatever type we carry out, no matter how disciplined or devoted we may be, this is the dynamic we run into.

Impulsiveness is the immediate and concrete cause of our separating from our Soma, from our own inborn enlightenment. If we can dismantle that blind, almost instinctive reactivity, then our Soma and its state of realization may become more available to us. Initially, impulsiveness is the fundamental issue addressed by the somatic practice of Pure Awareness. If we are left-brain, top-down meditators, what we can’t remain with is our breath; if we are bottom-up, somatic practitioners, it is the Soma we can’t stay with. But meditators all, we face this very same obstacle. There is some kind of powerful impulsive force that causes all of us, without much awareness, to lose what we are trying to mindfully attend to and to exit into our thinking mind.

So what about this impulse? What is it and how may we begin to deal with it? The word “impulse” may call to mind a lack of impulse control, as in someone who acts out uncontrolled, overwhelming emotions such as anger and aggression, jealousy or fear, wild paranoia or compulsive desire. In this common definition, our feelings may be so unbearably intense that we have to off-load them. Thus we might think of someone as being impulsive who acts out without being able to give sufficient consideration to the possible consequences of expressing outwardly such difficult-to-handle and potentially destructive feelings.

While not unrelated to these meanings, the Buddhist term for “impulse,” *samjña*, refers to something much more subtle and basic. Impulse as understood in Buddhism plays a critical role—in fact, it is the central player—in the

moment-to-moment birthing of our rather shaky, porous, fragile ego concept. Our ego is not a solid, enduring entity; rather, it is a made-up idea or thought of “me,” which arises and dies away in each instant. Usually, we are so wrapped up in our thinking and moving so fast mentally that we are oblivious to the impermanence of our ego concept. However, the truth is that in order to maintain the illusion that this ego idea is real, solid, continuous, and therefore reliable, we spend most of our waking and sleeping moments rehearsing and repeating it to ourselves, over and over: “I exist, I am solid and real, I must maintain the continuity of my self-narrative, and I must do this and that with all my effort to remain ‘me,’ for my survival depends on it.”

The Five Skandhas of the Illusory Ego

THE SO-CALLED SELF THAT WE imagine ourselves to be is created by us, each moment, out of a chaos of inherently unrelated items known in Buddhism as the five *skandhas* (“heaps,” as of disconnected experiences). It is the five skandhas taken together that make up what we mistakenly label as “me.” “Me” is just a complex idea; it has no basis in fact.

Impulse is one of the five skandhas. In order to better understand impulse, let’s consider its role within the framework of the five skandhas as a whole. Although the process of the skandhas is circular and without any real beginning or end, as an expedient to our understanding, we’ll look at it in a linear way. The rendition offered here is Trungpa Rinpoche’s, reflecting the view of the tantric style of Pure Awareness as practiced especially in Dzogchen.¹

First, in each discreet moment of our experience—and this means our everyday, “normal” psychological experience—before there is any ego or even any of the five skandhas at all, there is simply an open, empty, limitless field of awareness, what Trungpa Rinpoche calls “the basic ground.” This basic ground is Pure Awareness as it exists in us in pristine form, the open awareness of our Soma at its deepest level. Traditionally, this basic ground is known as our “buddha nature”; it is also called “the natural state,” meaning our own state that exists, naturally and spontaneously, as the enlightenment within us, before anything happens to it.

It is this ground that Trungpa often referred to in his teaching as being “groundless.” The basic ground is groundless because there is nothing for ego hang on to, no reference point, no nothing. Let’s call this basic ground “the groundless ground.” This fundamental or primordial experience of the Soma in its original and ultimate nature is the space—the ground—within which the five

skandhas are going to come about. It must be emphasized that the boundless space of this groundless ground and the skandhas birthing from it flash by so quickly that under normal circumstances, most people have no awareness whatsoever of them. We are aware of our ego but clueless as to where it came from or that it even came from anywhere at all. We think it was just always there.

Within the groundless ground, the space of the primordial Soma, there is a flash, a sudden burst or upwelling of energy. This energy abruptly appears from emptiness without boundary or limitation. It is what William Blake speaks of when he says, “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.” This sounds harmless enough, but when the experience of this energy arrives—as the manifestation of the empty, basic nature—it arrives with infinity and eternity as its only calling cards; and this can be unsettling to our ego and even quite terrifying. In terms of the three aspects of Pure Awareness discussed earlier, the basic ground is the quality of complete openness; the energy perceived within that is “something to experience”; and the sense of that energy abruptly arising is the spontaneous responsiveness. We may sense that the basic ground inseparable from its boundless energy is rushing toward us.

In response to this “moment” of infinity and eternity—for both time and space are abruptly obliterated in this instant—ego has an immediate panic response. The panic makes sense because ego has just met something far more real than itself; in relation to this, it has been exposed as groundless and unreal; in fact, it has just looked into the face of its own nonexistence. In reaction to this panic, ego reconstructs the mesmerizing, narcissistic illusion of itself, and it uses the five skandhas to do so.

The First Skandha: Ignorance-Form (Rupa)

In the first skandha—so fast that we don’t see it—we backtrack from the immediacy and intimacy of this totally open, seething, groundless, boundless experience, and we conjure up the idea of the presence of some “other” as object, over and against ourselves as subject. I say “conjure” because there is no actual basis upon which to create anything out of this burgeoning space. “Ignorance” conveys the fact that in this move we are simply ignoring the basic, groundless space, as when we deliberately ignore the presence of someone in the

room. “Form” means that, in our willful ignorance, we attribute to the empty space some kind of tangible existence that will now provide solid ground for ego to build on. But there is nothing there; the solid reference of this ground is just made up. This “other” isn’t anything definite yet, just some sense that the energetic space has become “other” and is somehow threatening.

It might be something like when we wake up in the middle of the night and, for a moment, do not know who or what or where we are. The mere presence of that big, undefined space is enough to throw us into a panic. Or like when we hear a loud, unexpected sound very near us, and we are momentarily lost; we jump, we withdraw, and we contract without actually knowing what is going on, if there really is a problem or a threat. That is a moment when the basic ground is an immediate experience for us and, especially if we are unprepared by practice, we frantically search for some reference point, something solid to hang on to.

So in that moment of open space with its powerful energetic aspect upwelling from the basic ground, there is a retraction from the space as other, there is a flailing about in it as we desperately try to find some recognizable reference point, some solid ground; and all we have to work with—literally—is completely open and indeterminate. So we imagine this nameless nothing-definite to be something, a threatening “other.” Then “we” are back, though at a very rudimentary level, at least having “me” here and this threat over there.

This initial projection of “other” is the birth of dualism at the most primitive level. It isn’t that the threatening, limitless space has changed and become something else. Rather, we project onto it that there is some *thing* there. It is this impression of some *thing*, purely our own dissociated delusion, that is named “form.” Again, the impression rests on ignorance: hence “ignorance-form.” Notice the order: first there is the ignorance, then we can delude ourselves that there is a solid thing there, a form. So now we have this as-yet-nameless something over there, as opposed to “me” here. To state again, nothing has actually happened to change the basic ground of Pure Awareness, except that we are beginning to make up a dualistic world, literally out of nothing.

The Second Skandha: Feeling-Evaluation (Vedana)

Next, in our panic to orient ourselves so we can regain a feeling of being on safe and familiar ground, we sense whether this supposed “other” is something we

want, something we don't want, or something that is of no interest either way, and whether from ego's standpoint it is likely to be pleasurable, painful, or neutral. And now there arises "feeling-evaluation." Of course, different people are going to like and dislike different things, depending on their own past experiences and karmic situation. So how do we take the groundless ground and arrive at the specific but still primitive feeling tone of like, dislike, and neutral?

We reach back into the memory database of our so-called reptilian brain, which offers judgments about survival and annihilation. These are linked with our limbic system, our mammalian "emotional brain." Relying on our own database of traces of past experience, we project that onto the situation in skandha 2. Consider how often, without even thinking about it, we have an "instinctive" feeling about some person or situation and immediately jump to positive or negative conclusions, only to find out later that we were completely wrong; we had no actual somatic connection with what was really there. We are seeing the results of the operation of skandhas 1 and 2. These first two steps are so rudimentary and occur so quickly that for most people they take place entirely in the unconscious, beneath the threshold of conscious awareness.

The Third Skandha: Impulse (Samjna)

And now for where we've been heading in this discussion: the all-important "impulse," skandha number 3. On the basis of steps one and two, we react; we are "triggered," as we say these days—it is a knee-jerk response over which ordinarily we have no control. This is impulse. We leap toward what we think will feed us; we push away or turn from what threatens us; and we turn a blind eye to everything else. The agency implied in the phrase "turn a blind eye" is important. When there is no conscious acknowledgment of something in our immediate environment, we may claim, to others and ourselves, that we just didn't notice. This is entirely disingenuous. We deliberately choose not to pay attention because it is not relevant to our ego's survival. In impulse, not only is there no conscious thought in or behind our reactivity, it is generally also not conscious at all; thus, in normal experience, this activity of the third skandha, like the first two, occurs in the darkness of the unconscious.

How many times have we run into a situation—say, with another person—and the next thing we know we have said something hurtful; we have retracted in fear; we were aggressive; we wound up in bed with them, so to speak; or we

have completely missed something that was right there in front of us? It may be unfamiliar to think of ignorance as a function of impulse, but it is such a function, no less than are the more fiery affects of impulse. And then, of course, we have to deal with consequences that our adult self may find quite upsetting and sometimes even appalling. Occasionally, our impulsiveness can impact our life in major and lasting ways, and usually not for the better. So impulse is, not only from the spiritual standpoint but also from the practical, potentially a big problem. It is a powerful and dangerous force and often one with which there is little conscious agency, especially when some kind of awareness and restraint is most needed. Impulse is something with which we had best be in a conscious relationship.

We may think, “Wait a minute! That person said something really nasty to me, and, quite justifiably, I reacted by saying something nasty back. I knew what I was doing; I decided to do it.” However, Buddhism teaches that it is not like this. You were driven by the automatic operation of the first three skandhas, and your impression of a deliberate, conscious choice is an illusion. We are hardly the free and self-aware agents we think we are.

Neuroscience has lent credibility to the idea that these first three steps of the skandhas do indeed normally occur beneath the threshold of conscious awareness; not just form and feeling, but also the reactivity of impulse typically occur before we have any conscious awareness of them. Some recent research has demonstrated that there is a measurable time lapse between, first, the unconscious somatic assessment and more or less blind “decision” involved in feeling driven to react to something on the basis of past experience (skandhas 1 to 3) and, second, our becoming aware that a decision is even up for consideration, and then thinking that we are making it. In other words, the first three skandhas have already decided on our course of action before we become aware of any possible choice. So our “choice”—our sense of being in control—is just made up; it is self-deception; things are not that way. That is how deep and subtle—and normally how automatic—the process culminating in impulse is. Are you feeling a bit unnerved right now? I am! The fact is, when we as meditators catch a whiff of what is actually going on, it can be not only embarrassing but humiliating to our illusion of ego autonomy.

While skandhas 1 through 3 have partially domesticated the original wildness of the primordial upwelling, they have left the job only half-done; they have not rendered it fully ego friendly. That task will now be achieved by skandhas 4 and 5. Skandha 4, “karmic formations” (*samskara*), and skandha 5, “defensive

consciousness” (*viñāna*), try to return us to the adult world of our apparently autonomous and solid self-conscious ego. Skandhas 4 and 5 fill out the illusion that we know what’s going on and we are in control of our selves. In order to do this, they invite us to flee from the more tangible somatic world of the first three skandhas into their isolated and well-defended left-brain fortress of conceptual abstraction and rationalization. Interestingly, impulse provides the escape vehicle, racing us to safety across the bridge from the more embodied, painful, and problematic sphere of feeling both threatened (skandha 1) and also the more or less unmanageable feelings of skandha 2.

The Fourth Skandha: Karmic Formations (Samskara)

Through the fourth skandha, karmic formations, we convert the original threatening experience pushing upward into consciousness into a familiar and safe quantity. By categorizing, labeling, and seeming to pin down the initial direct experience and adding story lines or ego narratives to it, we transform it into a facsimile version. The naked, raw, and rugged quality, the intimidating affect, that first accompanied it has mostly or entirely disappeared from our consciousness, replaced by a series of concepts and rationalizations. And now—even in the face of contrary evidence all around us—we believe that we have captured the reality of the original experience and own it; we know what it is; and we can completely ignore the perhaps frightening and potentially destabilizing quality of our direct (and boundless) experience. As far as we are concerned, it doesn’t exist, and it never happened.

Have you ever met up with someone you knew earlier in your life and with whom you shared important events, and then talked about “what happened”? In my experience, I find that we report very different experiences of what occurred. I was recently interviewed by someone writing a book that included some history that we shared. Though I might have known better, I was really quite shocked to see how completely different were our memories of what had actually happened. It seemed to me she was cherry-picking her recollections, including only those situations and interactions that appeared, momentarily to her, to define our relationship and fit into her ego narrative. And she left aside other events that to me were much more important and defining. Of course, she reported feeling the same way; but when you see such examples in your own life, it does give you pause.

We hear about politicians “rewriting history,” and we rightly find this practice deplorable. But this is just an extreme example of what we all do all the time: we are constantly rewriting our own history, right as it is happening. Of course, humans need a coherent story of their lives, a narrative, in order to be psychologically healthy and functional. The problem comes because, for most of us, our narratives too often don’t seem to have much relationship with the actuality of events they supposedly describe. Healthy narratives become unhealthy, obviously, when they depart too far from our actual life experience.

The somatic practice of Pure Awareness represents a dramatic and even cataclysmic shift, for it begins to bring our conscious memory—and our personal stories, dramas, and narratives—into greater and greater alignment with the Soma’s own total and objective recall, the infinitely inclusive and nonjudgmental knowledge it has of every moment of our past and present life. As one of my mentors said to me way back, “The Soma really doesn’t care whether its knowledge is painful or pleasurable to our ego. Its *only* agenda is to bring us—our conscious, ego self—into touch with what our life has actually been and currently is.” As Carl Jung said, the unconscious “wants” to become conscious; that is its mission. And woe to those who try to fend off its truth. From the tantric viewpoint, any process of realization that does not involve, in a continuous and unending way, thoroughly updating our conscious files with what the Soma knows is not only incomplete, it is bogus. For when consciousness is resisting information held in the body, in the unconscious, then we are not capable of authentic awareness. So much of our psychic energy is tied up in maintaining our ego stance and the repression this entails that any “awareness” is going to be paltry indeed. Stated in the positive, only when we are connected with the complete openness of our deepest Soma is authentic Pure Awareness as a spiritual realization going to be possible.

The Fifth Skandha: Defensive Consciousness (Vijnana)

With the fifth skandha, defensive consciousness, we set the facsimile we created with skandha 4, this fictitious version, into the overall conceptual framework that is our ego, and we feel or try to feel safe and secure and, above all, in control. The fifth skandha acts as a kind of watchdog, an ultimate defender of our ego, analogous to what we called in junior high school a “hall monitor,” of the first four skandhas. In my junior high school, at the top of the food chain was the “head monitor,” who stood in the most important and trafficked location.

This person's sole function was to stand in the very middle of two crossing hallways and to watch to make sure that everyone obeyed the rules: you had to stay on the right; you had to yield to people crossing in front; you couldn't walk too slowly or too fast; no eating or drinking on the run; no inappropriate clothing; and so on. Just having this vigilant presence there in the midst of the flow meant everybody was on his or her good behavior and mostly kept to the rules. Of course, once people escaped the head monitor's field of conscious awareness, all hell might break loose. And this is just how it is with us: what is going on down the hall of our unconscious can be the most shocking chaos and confusion.

The fifth skandha is the head monitor. It makes sure everything that arrives at the level of conscious awareness is following the rules. Nothing is allowed to destabilize the system, the coherent narrative of our ego. Whatever breaks the rules is debarred from admittance to conscious awareness. Thus, as a critical part of this function, the fifth skandha is always trying to push back down into the unconscious any information that would threaten or call into question our basic ego identity and its illusion of autonomy and control. Since nearly all information in the inner and outer world does not just challenge but in fact disconfirms what we are always trying to think about ourselves and our lives, this is an enormously demanding function and one that requires a sometimes fierce constant vigilance. Of course, we are never entirely successful in this—hence the inherent stress, anxiety, and pain of trying to pull off our ego project. The suffering of never being quite able to make our ego version work is what the Buddha called *dukkha*, the first noble truth of dissatisfaction and pain.

The skandhas, then, are an autonomous, self-perpetuating, and automatic system. Everything, from our initial freak-out and blind separation (skandha 1) down to the sophisticated stories we tell ourselves, the wonderful memories that are the building blocks of our sometimes quite elegant versions of ourselves (skandha 4), and the ever-so-refined territoriality of our consciousness (skandha 5), is part of a machine that goes along just fine without any reference whatsoever to any separately existing “self.” This is what Buddhism means by “no self” (*anatman*). Literally, the realization of no self is that there is only this self-perpetuating machine and nothing else.

Terrifying as such an insight might be to us ordinary folk, it was just this that freed the Buddha once and for all from, as the texts say, the terrible burden of having a “self.” It is as if you had spent your whole life thinking that every moment of your existence required feeding, pacifying, looking after, and

protecting what was, in truth, a rather dangerous, devious, and destructive demon. And then all of a sudden you realized one day that there is no demon and never was; you yourself had just made it up. Then your freedom would be boundless and joyful beyond measure, would it not?

It is worth mentioning again the nonlinear, organic unity of the skandhas as our basic ego structure and function. Our initial retraction from the groundless ground of our being (skandha 1) is so primitive that it probably has only slight, if any, dependence on the more individualized, developed skandhas. However, the other four skandhas are intimately and mutually related to one another in a continuous feedback loop. Thus, feeling-evaluation (skandha 2) occurs as a nuanced response that is connected to our specific past experiences and the memories that are encoded throughout our body. Feeling-evaluation, then, reflects and is reflected in the manner of our impulsivity (skandha 3), the kinds of labels, judgments, and narratives we apply (skandha 4), and the content of what we accept and do not accept at the gates of consciousness (skandha 5).

How the Practice of Pure Awareness Addresses the Skandhas

SO HOW ARE WE GOING to free ourselves from the small, confining ego prison that we have imposed on ourselves by hanging on to our skandha functioning? We could try a top-down approach. Ordinarily, as I've mentioned, we humans are not aware of the operation of the first three skandhas. Normally we are conscious only of our constant conceptualizing (skandha 4) and our defensiveness (skandha 5), and even how much self-awareness we have of these is questionable. In a top-down approach, through using a technique of mindfulness (such as focusing on the breath), we are hoping to slow down our thinking process enough to arrive at a state of relative calm, presence, and even peace.

As many can attest, this does work, at least up to a point, and can yield positive impacts on our stress level, health, well-being, and happiness. We become less bound up in thinking, less defensive, and our impulsivity often undergoes a very welcome abatement. There is just more room in our mind. But impulse and the feeling it feeds on, not to speak of the basic separation that underlies both, are generally not fundamentally addressed in the top-down style of practice. If we don't move beyond this approach, we will find ourselves still the same neurotic individuals after years of practice, especially when we get up off our meditation cushion and interact with the difficult situations, emotions, and people who make up ordinary life. We sense that something fundamental in us having to do with our ego and self-preoccupation has not been dealt with. We still get triggered, we still react, and we find that the basic freedom that we have always longed for in our practice somehow still eludes us.

Alternatively, we could follow the bottom-up approach of the somatic practice

of Pure Awareness. In this case, we drop directly into our body. Then we find, often initially to our surprise, that we have actually bypassed the fourth and fifth skandhas, karmic formations and defensive consciousness, and are in the subcortical regions of the Soma. For many of us, we have just discovered a brand-new world. But this is not all. The somatic practice has enabled us to drop underneath the first three skandhas as well, ignorance-form, feeling-evaluation, and impulse.

For the fact is, the practice has allowed us to connect with the fundamental reality of our Soma, our basic nature, the sphere of Pure Awareness itself; and this stands completely outside of ego's territory and operation. Through the practice, we are in touch with the complete openness of our buddha nature, with its ineffable energetic dimension, and with its tendency toward spontaneous response. This is no small thing. As Suzuki Roshi says, when we arrive in this way in the territory of Pure Awareness, we *are* buddha.¹ Previously sound asleep, we suddenly find ourselves in the domain of the awakened state itself, in its full, perfect, pristine form.

This waking up, if you will, is central to the somatic practice of Pure Awareness for several reasons. To begin with, its brilliance and openness are felt in our bodies with relief, complete relaxation, and a boundless sense of vast openness, bright clarity, total freedom, and upwelling joy. The experience is, as you may discover, intensely and thoroughly somatic.

This enables us to see just how dark, close, self-involved, and claustrophobic the world of the thinking mind is. When we are in that mind, we feel so trapped and lifeless, so pinned down and unfree; when we enter the domain of Pure Awareness, it is exactly the opposite. Initially, this contrast can be experienced as excruciatingly painful—not something we want to endure long-term, not sustainable. The more we practice, the more painful and unacceptable our time within the thinking mind becomes. As we continue, we do feel we are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. The deep blue sea is, in this case, the awakened state, and the devil is obviously our nonstop, compulsive thinking mind.

Though it can be quite agonizing at times, the contrast between the two has important outcomes. First, of course, having seen the terrible prison we've been in and also that there is something else outside, we are deeply—dare I say fervently—inspired toward our practice. Second, and also critical, we now see that what the teachings are talking about is absolutely and completely real. It is

right there, just waiting for us.

Mind you, entering the country of enlightenment does not mean that our habitual patterns have simply disappeared. The automatic functioning of the five skandhas is still alive and well (though with each such somatic journey into the awakened state, they grow less and less alive and less and less well). However, at the same time, and importantly within our actual experience of Pure Awareness, they are nowhere to be seen. They are nonoperative. We are in a place where there are no five skandhas. This further inspires us and gives us confidence in the journey we are making. It means that however triggered and derailed we may get, however many emotional freak-outs and meltdowns we may have, however hijacked by our thinking we may be, at any moment we can come back into our body, we can open, and there we are again in the space of relaxation, freedom, and joy.

This is most vital because the more we realize how crazy our thinking mind can be, how devious, disconnected, and destructive it sometimes is, the more vulnerable we feel and the more our habitual defensive ego responses are activated. As the tradition makes superclear, this journey is not for the faint of heart. Yes, the payoffs are beyond anyone's wildest imagination; but, as is said, true freedom does not come for free. So even in our most ecstatic moments, the five skandhas are in the shadows just hankering to get back into the game of running our lives. Initially, we are able to stay in and with Pure Awareness only for very brief moments before our attention is taken over by some surge of skandha activity and, often without realizing it, we have disconnected from our Soma and disappeared into our delusional left-brain miasma. And when we are not meditating but involved in daily life, the skandhas' sheer power over us is even more intensely felt; and it is excruciatingly clear that the five skandhas are by and large still in charge.

In fact, owing to our greatly increasing sensitivity and insight, it can appear that our neurotic involvement in the five skandhas is getting worse. "The darkest hour is just before the dawn" definitely applies here. Please keep in mind that the dawn we are going to see truly surpasses by a million times anything we have ever seen before. Whatever it takes to stand on that beach and look over the ocean toward the horizon with the dawn of true awakening just appearing—*whatever it takes*—is so worth it.

The ultimate goal of the practice of Pure Awareness is not just to tolerate the fact that the five skandhas don't go away (even if they are out of the picture

when we are in our deepest Soma) and to hope for the best. In fact, where we are heading is that the five skandhas exeunt, they exit the stage, permanently, not just in moments. And this goal unfolds in phases. We are looking first to be able to connect with the awakened state, or even just to sense it, in our body. Next, we want to learn just where it resides within our somatic experience; then to begin to see how we ourselves can find that place through our practice. The next phases unfold from there: we develop the capacity to rest in the awakened state for increasingly longer periods of time without distraction; then, to move through our daily life while ever abiding within Pure Awareness and to connect with the situations, emotions, and people we meet with its unbroken openness and spontaneous responsiveness; and finally—and this is a long way down the road for most of us—even in our sleep to be abiding in the endless, flowing, joyful diamond river of deepest awareness. Such, in any case, is what the tradition holds out for us. What could be more worth working for?

Unwinding the Five Skandhas

So the crucial question is: how are we going to gradually dismantle the five skandhas so they no longer obscure our own deepest nature and our deepest life? We have already talked about part of the answer. Taking what we have observed in our deepest Soma as a reference point, the first step is to see the five skandhas clearly and understand how pernicious, dangerous, and destructive they are. We need to appreciate how their nefarious activity not just limits but actually poisons every aspect of our life: our health, well-being, happiness, and especially our sanity; our relationships with other people; our creativity; our enjoyment of the world...the list is as long as the inventory of our entire life. We need to see this, face the hard truth, and drop our wishful thinking that somehow, if we remain under the authority—the authority, really—of the five skandhas, anything is actually going to work out for us, including any basic transformation or spiritual realization.

So that is step one. Step two involves actually dismantling the five skandhas. To emphasize: through our practice, we are not trying to create awakening; we are not striving to manufacture a certain pure state that does not currently exist in us. Through the practice, by withdrawing our investment in maintaining the five skandhas, we are simply allowing them to unwind and fall apart. A traditional analogy is that of the Indian fakir who ties a snake in knots for his audience, then tosses it up in the air; seemingly miraculously, the snake unties itself. The five

skandhas are like that: give them enough space, which is what the practice allows, and they will automatically unwind. It may take time, but eventually they will completely dismantle themselves.

From the Vajrayana point of view, the five skandhas, in their pure and original form, do not like being in the service of our egos; they do not want the job of helping us maintain our solid, delusional sense of self. This is not their basic, inherent, genetically driven job description. Their actual nature is to be perfect, pure, and free and to be in service of the awakened state. Thus the tradition does not just talk about “the malicious skandhas of grasping” (*upadana skandhas*) but also about another kind of skandhas, which operate freely without reference to ego. These are the *anupadana skandhas*, “the skandhas of nongrasping,” the enlightened or awakened skandhas. These healthy skandhas are developed along the path.

Let me say a little about this now, and we can explore it further below. The pernicious skandhas of grasping are the ego’s perversion of the skandhas in their original purity within Pure Awareness. For example, the first skandha, ignorance-form, is actually a perversion of the complete openness of the natural state of Pure Awareness. That complete openness is petrifying for the ego because it represents a total lack of reference points; so our ego withdraws from that open space and demonizes it as a deeply threatening “other.” The term “petrify” originally meant “turn to stone,” and this is exactly what happens in ignorance-form: confronted by empty, open, dynamic space—originally our own deepest nature—we literally freeze that space into the dangerous “other.”

In the same way, the second skandha, feeling-evaluation, is ego’s version of “something to experience,” the second quality of Pure Awareness. “What is there to be experienced” is the infinite display of phenomena, all that is beyond the reach of imagination, all that is ineffable, independent of judgment, evaluation, labeling, and control. Their quality and their scope are infinite. This again is terrifying for ego, and so it selects from the immeasurable display, then fixates on specific phenomena as being either desired, unwanted, or irrelevant to its existence. It freezes selected phenomena from the limitless expanse into lifeless wooden facsimiles, to be captured in terms, labels, and judgments.

Again in the very same way, impulse, the third skandha, is ego’s distorted version of responsiveness. The open, unfettered, spontaneous responsiveness of Pure Awareness, its third quality, responds to situations from a space of complete nonself; the response can then be entirely in terms of what situations and people

need, without the narcissistic, self-referential distortions of ego. But currently our “response,” in its distorted version, is defined by whatever will maintain our sense of separate self.

What about the fourth and fifth skandhas, karmic formations and defensive consciousness? Similar to each of the first three skandhas, karmic formations and defensive consciousness are also ego’s distorted versions of facets of our own inner enlightenment. Skandhas 4 and 5 are, in fact, further aspects of spontaneous responsiveness, the third quality of Pure Awareness. Let’s begin with skandha 4, karmic formations. In Vajrayana, thoughts are said to be the “expressions” of Pure Awareness. They can either be impure—the pernicious skandhas of grasping—or they can be pure. In their impure form, they function to solidify, rationalize, and legitimize our delusional ego world. However, in their pure form, they are open, empty reflections of the awakened state. Think of the Zen analogy of the finger pointing to the moon. In this analogy, the moon is enlightenment itself, while the pointing finger is the concept of enlightenment. When we think the finger pointing to the moon is the moon itself, then that is taking the concept to be the real thing; that would be the fourth skandha, karmic formations in delusional form, as a pernicious skandha of grasping. However, when we see that the finger, the concept, is nothing more than a mental construction—just an idea—pointing us in a certain direction, then we are able to see through it, so to speak, to the real thing, the moon, which is what that concept intends to point to. When we see the finger is nothing more than a pointer, that the moon is utterly above and transcendent of the indicator, that is skandha 4 in its pure form.

Defensive consciousness, also, is a distorted version of awakening. In its ego form, it is the head monitor who strictly controls what is or is not admitted to consciousness. And it is guided by the self-serving agenda of ego to maintain its delusional sense of identity, reality, agency, and control. But what happens to it when the egoic twist of the pernicious skandhas of grasping is no longer present? For one thing, the requirement that everyone follow the rules is dropped. The fifth skandha is no longer in the business of strictly trying to maintain a brittle, dissociated sense or sphere of self. Consciousness thus becomes less of an enforcer and more of a witness. It is still the keeping-track part of our ego, but it does so in a much more relaxed and accommodating manner. This means that it releases its interest in keeping unwanted (from ego’s standpoint) things in the unconscious and in repressing unwanted conscious content back into the darkness. It becomes more of a host that welcomes whomever comes to the

conscious door, inviting it to present itself, seeing what it wants, making room for it to express itself, and then contemplating how to respond. Some things are admitted, some are turned aside, but the decisions are no longer unconscious ones based on insecurity and habitual impulse; instead, they are conscious choices made according to an awareness of the larger situation and its needs. It recognizes the sacredness of all phenomena and proclaims this fact with its openness, welcome, generosity, and appreciation.

When We Exit the Soma

In the somatic practice, through the meditation posture of Pure Awareness, we gain the capacity to touch base with the awakened state within. In fact, the practice is to continually touch that inner awakening by using the posture. Our aim is to stay within that open, unconditioned, and, truthfully, infinite space as much as we can. But often quickly—in the beginning, very quickly indeed—we find ourselves gone, caught in the unending feedback loop of our thinking mind. Then, surprisingly, in this moment of recognition, we find we are back in the Soma again. The brilliant, open space is right there, if we are willing to see it.

The primary obstacle here is that when we notice we have departed, we become upset. “Oh, dear, there I have gone and exited from my basic nature. Drat! I need to do better.” While this thought is natural in the beginning, absolutely the only thing it accomplishes is to cloud over the glimpse of the awakened state that was available the moment we recognized our thinking. Let me just say this again, because it is extraordinarily important. The moment we, in distraction, wake up and see we are distracted, right there the natural state—our inner enlightenment—is fully present. When we go into judgments about our departure, we have exited from that immaculate state back into our left-brain thinking.

What to do? We need to realize that our exiting is literally not worth thinking about. We need to contemplate, and most of all explore in our practice, that having no ego response to our departure back into thinking is the best response. It is said that no response is the best response; in this case no response is actually the enlightened response to the situation, the third aspect of Pure Awareness. To put it in Vajrayana terms, nonaction is the enlightened response not just to this but to all situations. More about this startling asseveration below.

This points to the second step in the process of dismantling the skandhas.

When we depart from the interior awakened state and realize that, we are back. Giving our departure no thought, again, we abide in that interior illumination for as long as it lasts. Then when we depart and recognize that we have done so, again we are back and we abide.

Sometimes our departures can go on for quite some time. There is absolutely nothing gained in giving that a thought either, and, as I am saying, to do so just creates an obstacle. Sometimes, again, we get supertriggered or something dramatic has happened, and no matter how hard we may try to stay present, we simply cannot do it and may be gone for an hour. Again, notice when you notice and realize that just then you are already back.

The fact is, all of our departures happen in accordance with our own karmic situation. These are not things we can control, try as we may. In fact, their surfacing is important. The more material that arises in us, the more material comes into the light of awareness. Even if it seems like the same old thing, it isn't. It is what, right then, needs to well up from our unconscious, appear in the light of day, and be assimilated into our journey.

The Maturing Practice

There are two dynamics to notice. First, every time we come back to the posture of Pure Awareness and touch the enlightenment within, we are developing what is called "familiarity." Every time we return, we are making it that much easier to return in the future. In addition, over time, you will find yourself naturally remaining with the inner, open expanse for longer and longer periods without being distracted.

Of course, we can see this only over the long haul. You can't really observe it from day to day, because the strength of material coming up is constantly changing, and hence its power to distract is also changing. Even when we find ourselves remaining for a short period of time, on certain days, we find we cannot extend this period by sheer willpower. That just separates us more. Again, the best policy is not to give a single thought to how long we remain or how often or long we depart.

So the first dynamic in dismantling the skandhas is that as our familiarity with the awakened state increases, so does our capacity to remain within it. The second dynamic concerns the actual dismantling process. When we depart into thinking, over time we find we see the departure more and more quickly, thus

coming back more quickly, and we gain more and more insight into what it is that pulls us into our thinking mind. Having the open, objective awareness of the Soma as our background and reference point, when we depart and return, we find ourselves seeing the face of the demon of ego with increasing clarity and comprehension. This undermines our investment in the pernicious skandhas of grasping. We find our own ego process less and less compelling or even interesting.

As a powerful and transformative part of this process, our time spent in the country of enlightenment, within our body, becomes more and more open, fresh, free, joyful, and compelling. As our practice matures, we come to find the periods when we are distracted increasingly painful and the times when we dwell in the brilliant interior space increasingly longed for and sought after.

We might think, “What hard work! Why would anybody want to give up their entire ordinary life for that?” Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche put his finger right on it when he asked, do you want to know what true hell is for the Pure Awareness practitioner? and answered, “Hell is separation from the Dharmakaya.”² Compared to the openness, the freedom, and the joy of the awakened state within, the ordinary functionings of our egos and our thinking minds are increasingly nightmarish. Having tasted the pure, refreshing water of life, you would think that nobody in his or her right mind would ever prefer the putrid, brackish, polluted water of ego; that he or she would recoil from even a drop.

We do feel that way, but our habitual patterns of avoidance and separation are so very deeply ingrained and powerful. And our steady practice is going to be the only remedy. As our practice continues, then, the inner illumination becomes brighter and brighter, and the pernicious skandhas of grasping lose their vitality, their appeal, and, finally, their power over us. We are left with the brilliant body of awakening, what is called “the Vajra body”; and then the three aspects of Pure Awareness define our entire experience of being human.

This whole process is not only a personal, psychological, or inwardly “spiritual” thing. I am always interested to read the work of physicists, especially in the areas of quantum physics and astrophysics. The game-changing discoveries in the past decades have come with such volume and rapidity that now one finds authors saying—and often it is explicitly stated—that “today this is how we are all looking at it, but likely tomorrow we will look at the whole matter completely differently. The fact is, we don’t actually know very much at

all about what is going on.”

Especially in physics these days, there is a kind of lightness and ease with the great unknowns, an attitude of not taking oneself and what one thinks too seriously, because there is the recognition that labels, categorizations, and even entire explanations and interpretive systems are just maps, and reality is something entirely different. One feels today in the writing about physics much freedom and even joy between the lines of even technically rather dry books. Perhaps it is because these people spend so much time contemplating eternity, the infinity of space, how it is that any of this happened at all, and how fragile and changing anything we think about the universe is.

As for our overall ego itself, with all its five skandhas, through somatic meditation it now becomes healthy and wholesome, a fluid concept of “self” that is more relaxed, open, and able to adjust its identity in relation to the new information that is constantly arriving from the Soma. Instead of embodying a defensive strategy of warding off change and of trying to rationalize and justify essentially unconscious, irrational behavior, the ego now becomes almost a kind of advocate and spokesperson for change. This is, of course, because it is now in service to the Soma.

The conscious ego self becomes the part of us that orchestrates the expression of the deep knowings and sentiments of the Soma and brings our life into alignment with them. Of course, none of this is going to happen unless, through our somatic practice, we can manage to expose, disempower, and dismantle impulse, the central player in the whole pathological functioning of ego, the linchpin without which ego’s game would crumble. Again, there will be much more to say about all of this; in fact, each of the succeeding sections will continue this conversation about how, through our practice, we may develop a healthy ego, one that reflects complete and awakened embodiment.

PART THREE

The Posture of Pure Awareness and Its Practice

The Essential Instructions for Pure Awareness Practice

I WOULD LIKE TO INTRODUCE you, in an experiential way, to the essentials of Pure Awareness practice. The style of Pure Awareness that I am going to teach you here uses our ordinary body as the gate through which we can access our primordial body or Soma and, ultimately, its fundamental awakened nature as Pure Awareness. For this reason, these instructions revolve entirely around the physicality of meditation—that is, the posture we take in the practice that shows us how to be in the body and uncover its full experiential possibility. This is the beginning and end of the practice. Of course, the Soma in its full possibility involves far more and also far less than what we think of as the “physical.” Thus, what the posture does for us is provide access to the full multidimensionality of the body, including the physical, feeling, energetic, and spiritual domains—in other words, to the body’s inherent, comprehensive enlightenment.

Practitioners of Zen will notice similarities between my emphasis on the importance of posture and the same emphasis in Zen and also between the specific instructions offered below and those given in the postural instructions for Zen shikantaza, or “just sitting.”¹ These similarities are not just coincidental. My own training has included the study of Zen, and I have learned a great deal from my Zen teachers about the somatic essence of meditation and how to approach the body as the gate to the unborn. Another critical thing I have learned from Zen is the importance of providing the somatic instructions at the very beginning of the student’s meditative journey, not restricting them to more advanced levels, as is customarily done in the Tibetan tradition.

At the same time, those familiar with Zen will notice that what follows is in many respects quite different from what is taught as shikantaza. Interestingly, the more advanced teachings of Tibetan yoga similarly emphasize the importance of

the body in meditation and provide many instructions that, though parallel to those given in shikantaza, talk in some significant ways about things I have not seen in Zen. Tibetan yoga offers techniques for explicitly exploring the inner somatic awareness that postural teachings can open up and also is more intentional in directing students to notice certain aspects of that internal bodily awareness. In addition, hearkening back to the Indian *pranayama* (breathing meditation) upon which Vajrayana Buddhism drew extensively in its early days, Tibetan instructions also unlock the inner experience of the breath, the energy pathways (*nadis*), most notably what is called “the central channel.” (We will be discussing all of these in due course.) The instructions I offer here thus draw on Zen as well as on Tibetan yoga. If you are familiar with and perhaps normally practice Zen shikantaza, I invite you to set that practice aside just for now and follow the Vajrayana approach. In the next few chapters of this book, we will revisit these instructions, and I will provide much more detail and explanation.

The posture of Pure Awareness is one unified, organic way of sitting; it is one all-inclusive somatic feeling and natural process of unfolding. At the same time, it is composed of quite a few discrete elements, some of which may be familiar and some of which may not. In order to assist your learning process, I have separated out each of the key elements—it will be useful to count seventeen in all—and I will guide you through them one by one, in a progressive manner. As we go along, my aim is for you to be able to effortlessly do the ones we have already learned, and focus on learning the next one and integrating it into the final whole.

It is essential that you practice, become thoroughly familiar with, and integrate each element so that it becomes natural to you. By the time we have completed number seventeen, I hope the way you sit down in meditation will reflect the posture of Pure Awareness in a simple, relaxed, and unselfconscious way and, in that, open you to the internal experience of your awakened Soma. What I am proposing is, of course, very much like learning to do anything that has several aspects: for example, in musical training, first you learn to play in one key, then another, then another, and so on; or in learning to drive a car, you study each aspect and practice in ever more inclusive ways until you feel adventurous enough to venture out into traffic.

I have divided the instructions for these seventeen elements into four guided meditations, each one including four or five of the seventeen. In order to support your practice, the same set of instructions given below is available as an audio guided meditation on the Shambhala Publications website, recorded specifically

for readers of this book and offered to you free of charge. In these recordings, I will be able to give you more nuance and detail than I can in print here. So whether you are new to meditation or not, I invite you to listen to the audio version, I hope multiple times, until you feel you have internalized and integrated the more subtle aspects of the practice and can do them on your own. The audio meditations can be found at www.shambhala.com/practiceofpureawareness.

To start, I will provide a bare-bones summary of the seventeen points of the posture of Pure Awareness, without much commentary, for two reasons: first, in order to give you the outline of the guided audio practice I would like you to do now; and second, so that you have a handy written sketch of the seventeen points you can use when you are doing this practice on your own, without my audio guidance. In subsequent chapters I will go into the practice in more detail, with extensive instructions.

The Practice of PURE AWARENESS

This would be a good place to begin exploring the Pure Awareness practice. If you do, everything I am saying from here on will make more sense. You can begin your exploration by following the written instructions below. If possible, though, it would be preferable to begin listening to the audios of the guided practices, if you have not already done so. You could perhaps listen to and follow one guided practice for one or a few days as you continue reading through the book.

If you are not going to be listening to the oral guided meditations for now but training in the practice by following the written instructions alone, I suggest the following approach. Take each of the four guided practices, in order, as a separate practice unit and work with it until you feel familiar enough with it so that you don't need to refer to the written instructions. More specifically, in meditation sessions of between 40 minutes to an hour, practice the first guided meditation for a while until you are comfortable with it. Then, when you begin working with the second guided meditation, go through the five steps you have already learned in Guided Practice I, but do them more briefly, perhaps taking 2 or 3 minutes for each. In a similar way, when you begin training in the third guided meditation, begin each session by practicing the nine steps of Guided

Practice I and II, again spending 2 to 3 minutes on each. And then follow the same process with Guided Practice IV, beginning with each of the steps of the first three guided practices in an abbreviated form. By the end of this process, you should be familiar with the entire posture of Pure Awareness as a single practice and be able to practice it on your own. I will be following exactly the same approach in the oral guided practices, beginning each new guided meditation by going through all the previous steps that we have learned up to that point.

GUIDED PRACTICE I

1. Sitting Position

There are three options for how we can sit in meditative posture. We can sit cross-legged on a cushion, the usual Theravada, Zen, or Tibetan style. We can also sit by kneeling on the floor with knees together and feet behind us, resting our buttocks on a cushion on our heels, Japanese *seiza* style; this posture may also be taken on meditation benches with no back, which are available on the Internet. Or, finally, we can sit in a chair, as long as we sit upright without leaning against the chair back.

It is important to find the right position, one that is going to allow physical ease and relaxation. Our desired sitting position will likely change over time as our body becomes more accustomed to meditation and our practice itself evolves. You can't find your "just right" sitting posture by thinking about it. You can discover it only by listening closely to your body's intuition and learning to trust that. In step 1, we are already beginning to develop our interoception.

2. Coming into Our Body

Having found your optimal (at least for now) sitting position, now bring your awareness fully into your body. You can do this by simply feeling the outer sensations of your body, where you are making contact with your meditation seat and the floor, the pressure of your clothes, the room temperature, et cetera. You can come further in by attending to your inner sensations, your breathing in and out, your heart beating, the flow of blood through your veins and arteries, muscular contractions, your neurological life. Now take a few breaths and try to sense your body as a whole. This is another big step in awakening our

interoceptive capacities.

3. Grounding in the Earth

In taking our posture, it is crucial to connect our somatic awareness with the earth beneath us. As you are sitting present in your body, try to sense the earth under you. Feel yourself resting on the earth; feel how the earth is supporting you. Then try to feel deeper down, to the presence of the earth below. What is that presence like? As small children being held by our mother or other loving caregiver, our sensations were not only physical. There was also an emotional entrainment; we could feel their protection, their nurturance, and their love. As our sensitivity develops, we are able to feel the very same things with mother earth as she holds us. See if you can begin to sense these qualities. Take some time to feel this presence of the earth beneath you. Experientially, in this step, we come to understand that when indigenous traditions refer to “mother earth,” this is not a metaphorical reference.

Here we may begin to sense something that will be most important in our somatic journey. First and foremost, as mentioned, interoception is an ability that enables us to know our body from the inside. But—and I hope this will become more clear below—when the capacity of interoception is well developed, it can enable us to go further; we can similarly tune in to and directly experience the inner being of what is usually considered “outside,” such as the earth, other people, the universe.

4. Breathing into the Lower Belly

Next, imagine that you are slowly and gently breathing directly into your lower belly. To do this, visualize a spot about four inches below the navel, on your center line, so roughly midway between the perineum and navel. Now imagine yourself bringing the breath directly into that place. Keep breathing in this way until you begin to feel some kind of sensation. As the breath enters, it could be as subtle as a very slight pressure, or it could be more obvious, such as a feeling of coolness and freshness. Keep in mind, we are working with what is called “the inner breath,” *prana* or *qi*, not the breath coming through our respiratory system. It feels different from the “outer breath,” but as we progress the sensation can become quite tangible. As you breathe, visualize that you are opening a space up in and around that spot. In the beginning, we are simply imagining, but as we continue, very real sensations and somatic experiences

begin to occur, so stick with it. Keep breathing in this way until you can sense the space opening up and what that space feels like. Let the space open further and expand slightly as you breathe. It could become the size of a hen's egg or even a goose egg. Try to feel the breath coming into that open space, filling and dissolving into it. Try to keep your awareness within this lower belly openness you are developing as you breathe. The longer you are able to carry out this practice, the more definite your felt sense of this space in the lower belly will become.

These first four steps are critically important for the posture of Pure Awareness for two reasons. First, they help us develop our interoceptive abilities and show us what it feels like to be somatically aware in that way. And, second, they provide the grounded, stable, and rooted-in-our-body feeling—and the somatic confidence that comes along with it—that must underlie any fruitful meditation practice.

5. Straight Back

Direct your awareness to your spine and allow it to come into an upright and relaxed alignment. I say “allow,” because your spine already knows what perfect alignment and relaxed balance are, and, in addition, it knows how to get there. It is just our ego attitude—literally, our posturing—that has thrown this alignment off, perhaps for our entire life. You can check your alignment by moving slightly forward and back, then side to side, to find what feels perfectly upright. This core element of the posture is found when the back is straight, with a feeling of relaxation, alignment, and rising spine. In this case “alignment” does not mean “straight” as we would see it from the outside, but as it is sensed from within. It is the feeling of a back that is upright, relaxed, and aligned without being rigid. “Rising” means a subtle somatic feel of upward flow. Feel this flow along the line of your spine just inside your body. Try to feel how the spine itself and its subtle rising energy are rooted in and emerging from the space of the lower belly. In this step, we are approaching awareness of what is called “the central channel,” a corridor of awareness, often thought of as tubelike in shape, that runs from our perineum up to the top of the head.

GUIDED PRACTICE II

6. Head Lifting

To further arrive at the posture of the straight, relaxed, aligned, and rising spine, next imagine the top of your head lifting toward the heavens. To do this, direct your attention to the back part of the top of your skull, to the crown of the head (the fontanel in infants)—the place about two-thirds of the way back—where the sutures of the skull bones have knitted together. It is from this point that the skull rises upward. It might help you to visualize a cord attached to the fontanel and the head being pulled up. The sense here should be energetic more than strictly physical; we are feeling the rising energy up along the back line, flowing up through the back of our head and naturally causing the head to float upward. As the head floats upward, we feel the spine itself elongate and rise upward as well.

7. Chin Down

Next, allow your chin to drop gently, almost imperceptibly, toward your chest. Allow it to drop to the end of your range of natural motion and then raise it up just a bit, so there is no feeling of strain or tension, just a sense of relaxation. As you drop your chin, notice how this draws your spine into a more upright and elongated position. Notice also how it opens and frees your spine and promotes a more definite sense of the upflow of energy along the back line.

8. Ears over Shoulders

Now imagine your ears are traveling straight back, bringing them in the plane of your shoulders. There is a feeling that the ears are continually drifting or moving backward. This step is important because it balances and corrects any tendency of the head to tilt down too far, especially from the chin-dropping step onward.

9. Open the Back of the Neck

Now put your attention on the back of your neck, the cervical spine between the top of your torso at shoulder level and the base of your skull. Can you feel any tension or restriction there? Can you feel your neck calling you for some further awareness and relaxation here? Is it providing an internal sense of just what it needs? Attending to your neck, then, letting it be the very focus of your attention right now, feel into it, allowing it to open, elongate, and relax. Let the feeling of this process translate and extend all the way down your spine and then all the way up to the top of your head.

This is an important step in developing a sense of the organic unity of our

entire spine from its base to the top of our head, not prioritizing any one part but being equally and somatically present through the whole length of it. Have the sense of this corridor as a whole that is opening, opening, opening, rising, rising, rising.

GUIDED PRACTICE III

10. Alignment

Having practiced the five previous aspects of working with our back line (steps 5 through 9), we are now in a position to greatly refine our alignment by exploring in more detail the forward-backward and side-to-side movements. Sitting in your upright posture, try moving incrementally forward and backward across the midline to find the spot where your back-to-front alignment feels the most upright, open, and unimpeded. You begin with rather larger movements across the midline, noticing where you cross the center space; it will feel completely empty and open. As you continue, make your movements smaller and smaller, until you are barely deviating from the midline at all. Then rest in that open, empty, effortless midline space.

Now go through exactly the same process with side-to-side movements. In order to find the midpoint in the side-to-side movements, you could visualize your nose arriving in a direct line over your navel. You might sit in front of a mirror to check your alignment or ask a fellow practitioner to stand in front of you to correct your posture.

11. Mouth and Jaw

The jaws should be relaxed, with the lips just touching. The tongue floats inside the mouth, which enhances empty, open awareness. You may need to spend a fair amount of time, perhaps over many meditation sessions, to find out just how tense your jaw is, how to release it, and what it actually feels like when it is in a state of relative relaxation. As you work with your jaw to loosen and relax it, notice the subtle but very definite impact this process has on the overall feeling of awareness, particularly along your back line and most especially in your neck and head region. Notice how it seems to soften, clarify, and open the space further.

12. Include the Heart

In the journey we have been making so far through the first eleven steps of the posture, something altogether central has been left out: that is our heart. Our heart with all of its subtle feelings has been hovering somewhere in the background, waiting to be included. Some of you may already have been sensing this. In any case, now we need to turn our attention to our heart center, right in the middle of our chest, at heart level.

Have a slight feeling of the heart center softening and opening. Have a sense of the shoulders relaxing and dropping slightly and the scapulae in the back moving toward each other. At this point, having developed such a strong sense of openness in our torso along the back line, we will likely be able to sense all kinds of feeling responses. In Vajrayana Buddhism it is said, “The more space, the more experience.” Our openness makes room in our consciousness for all kinds of subtle feelings, intuitions, and sensations that we had not previously noticed. None of these are random; they are all aspects of experience that have arrived in our Soma but that we have chosen to marginalize, discount, or even completely repress.

In particular, at this time our heart may resonate with an abundance of feeling, subtle yet strong and difficult to name. It may happen that difficult, painful feelings arise. If so, try to relax, remain grounded in your body, and open to them. They are just separated parts of yourself that want to come back. There may also arise warmth in the form of tenderness, longing, yearning, even incipient love, not for anything specific but as a quality of the heart space itself.

This is a momentous discovery. It is awakening to what our heart actually is and what it actually knows. As you open to your heart, feel the open, empty space of the central channel behind it; this will keep you from fixating too much on any particular feeling and becoming obsessed with or derailed by it. Just stay connected with the integrity of the central channel space, particularly where it passes behind the heart, and make room in your awareness for whatever feelings begin to brew in your heart.

If anything begins to feel too threatening or overwhelming, just back off your practice, don't try to go any further, and simply rest in your body. Physically back up too: just move your awareness to the back of the body and the central channel and totally relax and let go. Take a break for the day if necessary. This is your journey, and there is no rush.

13. *Eyes*

Eyes want to be resting downward at a forty-five-degree angle, perhaps half-closed, with a soft focus that reflects the inner intention of our practice. Feel the central channel space, the open, empty awareness, as it passes behind your eyes. Let the attention of your eyes gently surrender backward. Relax and open your gaze backward, as if it is the back part of your eyes that is seeing rather than the habitual frontal focus. Again, remaining within the central channel, this time as it passes behind the eyes, see how the central channel receives visual impressions, how it “sees.”

GUIDED PRACTICE IV

14. *Hands*

There are some choices here. The hands can be held in the Zen cosmic mudra, palms up, one hand nesting in the other, thumbs touching, forming an open circle in front of the lower belly space (the *hara* in Zen), just below the navel. They may be placed Tibetan style, palms down on the thighs or knees. Or you can simply rest your folded hands in your lap. What hand position you choose will depend on what kind of meditation seat you are using, your own physiognomy, and the imponderable of what feels just right to you. What hand posture best enhances the general feeling of openness in your central channel and, more and more, your torso and body as a whole? Again, experiment with your hand position and feel the impact on the overall somatic awareness that is now becoming more and more available to you.

15. *Breath*

As we attend to the elements of the posture just described, we become aware of our breath: we notice we are breathing in and breathing out. The way to practice with the breath is not to do anything with it. It doesn't matter whether it is fast or slow, superficial or deep, labored or relaxed, pleasant or unpleasant; in no way do we try to manipulate, alter, or change it. We simply note it as part of the developing experience of our body in the posture and leave it completely alone—leave it “in its own place,” as it is said—to be whatever it wants to be. As you sit, perhaps you will sense the breath arriving in your lower belly and moving

almost imperceptibly up your central channel. If so, just touch this very, very lightly, as if your breath is so subtle and refined that it almost seems like awareness itself.

When we do leave the breath as is, in its own place, a process of discovery can to begin to unfold. In being with our breath, attending to it but not interfering or meddling with its natural process, we begin to develop a conscious and ever-deepening relationship with the inner breath, of which the outer breath is the outer shell. As our practice of Pure Awareness deepens and evolves, our attention will naturally reside much more within the inner breath, and that subtle breath will become an essential guide.

16. Be in the Soma

This is an important step, for it gathers together what the first fifteen steps want to lead to and is the main intention of the entire practice: allow your awareness to inhabit and pervade your body as a whole. As much as possible, merge your awareness into the Soma; just be in your body, be your Soma. In this step, the posture arrives at a kind of fruition, and once we sense this totality of the Soma, another, further journey begins to open up.

17. Don't Move

This means that for the duration of our meditation session (normally forty to forty-five minutes), we commit to remaining in the posture of Pure Awareness without moving. While resisting the demands of impulse to fidget, squirm, or shift around on your meditation cushion, explore your experience. Take great interest in the play of your mind when you want to move but do not give in to the impulse and remain unmoving.



Guided Practice I

IN THIS AND THE NEXT three chapters, I am going to offer more detailed explanations of each of the seventeen aspects of the posture of Pure Awareness. I am breaking the explanations of the seventeen points of posture into four chapters for your convenience, but you can read through all four as a single, continuous narrative. Although I repeat the practice instructions, I do not intend for you to be practicing here. Read through the instructions and focus on my explanations of each to deepen your understanding. As you read through what follows, try to assimilate what I am saying into your bodily understanding of what is going on with each of these aspects and with the posture as a whole. And then incorporate that understanding into your actual practice.

Each of these steps can be read through fairly quickly, of course. But as you practice them, it is critically important that you give each one an ample amount of time so that you can feel into it, see how it feels in your body, and begin to explore the subtleties of your somatic sense. Beyond this, if you are willing to stay within a particular step for some period of time—say, fifteen or twenty minutes—you will find that it will begin to teach you exactly how it needs to be carried out. Your developing somatic feeling will guide you in inhabiting that point of the posture in just the right way. Of course, in a single practice session, you won't be able to take that much time with every step. But you could take that much time with one step, perhaps one you want to look into in more depth or one that feels particularly challenging to you.

In fact, as your own somatic intelligence begins to awaken, in your practice session your body will indicate to you where you need to put in more time, attention, and curiosity. The somatic information is going to come to you as a feeling of needing to spend time there, just as on a hot summer day you feel the

need for a glass of water. It is that simple, direct, and straightforward. Listening to your body and following its guidance only feels difficult before you learn how to do it; after that, it is the most natural thing in the world.

1. Sitting Position

There are three options for how we can sit in meditative posture. We can sit cross-legged on a cushion, the usual Theravada, Zen, or Tibetan style. We can also sit by kneeling on the floor with knees together and feet behind us, resting our buttocks on a cushion on our heels, Japanese seiza style; this posture may also be taken on meditation benches with no back, which are available on the Internet. Or, finally, we can sit in a chair, as long as we sit upright without leaning against the chair back.

It is important to find the right position, one that is going to allow physical ease and relaxation. Our desired sitting position will likely change over time as our body becomes more accustomed to meditation and our practice itself evolves. You can't find your "just right" sitting posture by thinking about it. You can discover it only by listening closely to your body's intuition and learning to trust that. In step 1, we are already beginning to develop our interoception.

Finding the meditation seat that is right for us at this moment is extraordinarily important. When we do find that just right seat, our body can then be open, upright, and relaxed, even feel effortless and free. This is crucial if we are going to be able to explore the posture of Pure Awareness. If the seat isn't right, we will be putting undue strain on our body when we try to meditate, causing us to tense up and to have to maintain constant effort just to be sitting there. The posture will feel forced rather than effortless.

How are we going to find just the right seat? If we are already meditators, we may have found what we need or at least be on the way toward it. If we have never meditated before, then it will take time and effort. What we are looking for is a seat in which we feel fully supported and secure and that allows us to sit for a while without discomfort. In addition, we want a seat in which our legs are right. This means that if our legs are crossed, there isn't too much strain on our hips or knees; if we sit seiza, our knees don't hurt, nor do our legs go to sleep; and if we are on a bench or a chair, we can sit upright without support, our knees

slightly lower than our hips so we aren't having to hold ourselves up.

Being able to relax fully on our meditation seat is also of great importance. The whole point of Pure Awareness practice is, as we have seen, to be able to abide in our fundamental Soma. This means that we can rest in our own unborn awareness and that there is no restriction in the energy of that space, both “what there is to experience” and also the free responsiveness. In order for this to happen, our body needs to be completely open, our senses naked and undefended, and our awareness unfettered. The key here is complete relaxation.

The unhindered, unbounded awareness involved here is, as we have seen, the ultimate threat to our ego consciousness. The ego wants to keep our scope of awareness very, very small and under complete control. Even what we do experience in that state is further restricted by being contained within labels, judgments, and ego-friendly narratives. The primary way the ego keeps experience so small and depotentiated is tension. Our conscious self tenses up so we do not have to feel what we don't want to feel, which is more or less anything genuine or real. We tense up against “what there is to experience.” We freeze so we can no longer feel in a naked way. If we pay attention to how we react to situations that are painful or threatening, we will see how this process works in us.

To put it in neurobiological terms, anything perceived as threatening brings about the activation of our sympathetic nervous system, our fight-or-flight response. The perceived threat can be physical, but in our modern world it is usually psychological. Stress hormones such as adrenaline, cortisol, and norepinephrine are released into our system. These have just the impact we are talking about: our system speeds up, our thinking mind goes into overdrive, our heart and breathing race. It is like pushing the accelerator to the floor. Most importantly, our muscles tense up, we are less able to feel pain, and, in fact, we are far less able to feel anything at all except fear—in some cases, terror—and rage.

Most of us modern people are in a state of perpetual activation; our sympathetic nervous systems are, at some level, always turned on. The result is that we arrive at the meditation cushion in a more or less permanently tense state. The tension in question here is, unfortunately, not just what we are conscious of. Yes, it includes all of the prominent and annoying tensions we all feel, for example in our legs, our knees, our lower back, our spine, our shoulders, and our neck. But the tension goes much further, and it is precisely the tension

we are not conscious of that can be the most damaging. We know now that organs can be tense, as can bones, blood vessels, and lymph passages. Molecular biology tells us that even our cells and the molecules that make them up can be tense. Tension in all these cases involves our sympathetic nervous system response to perceived threat. For example, in the case of our cells, oxygenation decreases, the flow of nutrients lessens, and the neurological functioning necessary for health is impeded. And, of course, the kind of open-ended, unrestricted experience of our Soma that we are looking for on our spiritual journey is greatly compromised. The experience that we seek is, literally, everything the body is aware of all the way down to what the cells know. So tension is the number one biggest obstacle to our journey, and we have to deal with it from the very beginning, or we will get nowhere. This is why step 1 is such an essential step: finding a meditation seat in which we will be able, over time, to relax fully and completely, even at the level of our cells. Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, the great teacher of Pure Awareness, makes this point simply: “The best relaxation brings the best meditation....We need the best relaxation.”¹

2. Coming into Our Body

Having found your optimal (at least for now) sitting position, now bring your awareness fully into your body. You can do this by simply feeling the outer sensations of your body, where you are making contact with your meditation seat and the floor, the pressure of your clothes, the room temperature, et cetera. You can come further in by attending to your inner sensations, your breathing in and out, your heart beating, the flow of blood through your veins and arteries, muscular contractions, your neurological life. Now take a few breaths and try to sense your body as a whole. This is another big step in awakening our interoceptive capacities.

In the beginning, you may not feel very much at all. It is fine if all you can sense right now is the pressure of your bottom on your seat; just pay attention to that. Try to stay there and feel more deeply into just what that sensation is like. As you do this, allow your somatic awareness to extend further, perhaps to your pelvis, above the feeling of your seat; then maybe to your legs and feet. Gradually, your interoceptive awareness will become more subtle and more extensive. Each time you sit down to meditate, explore your somatic sense a little further. When you take your posture, feel what you already have the

capacity to feel and then ask your body, “Okay, what’s next?” Just let it guide you along its own mysterious path. Right now you are greatly developing your ability to listen to and hear your body and, importantly, to follow its prompts. At this point, you are notifying your body you are there, not just for your own ego reasons, but for your body in its fullest sense, for your Soma’s larger purposes. In fact, already at this point in this process, experiences and insights may arise that go far beyond learning to sense your body in a mainly physical way.

3. Grounding in the Earth

In taking our posture, it is crucial to connect our somatic awareness with the earth beneath us. As you are sitting present in your body, try to sense the earth under you. Feel yourself resting on the earth; feel how the earth is supporting you. Then try to feel deeper down, to the presence of the earth below. What is that presence like? As small children being held by our mother or other loving caregiver, our sensations were not only physical. There was also an emotional entrainment; we could feel their protection, their nurturance, and their love. As our sensitivity develops, we are able to feel the very same things with mother earth as she holds us. See if you can begin to sense these qualities. Take some time to feel this presence of the earth beneath you. Experientially, in this step, we come to understand that when indigenous traditions refer to “mother earth,” this is not a metaphorical reference.

Here we may begin to sense something that will be most important in our somatic journey. First and foremost, as mentioned, interoception is an ability that enables us to know our body from the inside. But—and I hope this will become more clear below—when the capacity of interoception is well developed, it can enable us to go further; we can similarly tune in to and directly experience the inner being of what is usually considered “outside,” such as the earth, other people, the universe.

In virtually all the Pure Awareness traditions, but especially in Vajrayana, the body plays a unique role in relation to the larger “external” cosmos. In the tantric teachings and practices of what is called the microcosm (body) and the macrocosm (the external cosmos in its totality), the body itself is seen (and experienced!) as a complete embodiment, a kind of holographic form—but absolutely real, not imagistic—of the entire cosmos. Using modern terms, the

macrocosmic dimension would include the quantum emptiness that is understood to underlie both the origins of the universe and also the moment-to-moment life of subatomic particles; the infinite energy that arose and still arises from the quantum vacuity; and all the worlds of form, manifestation, and experience that the primal energy evolves into as it cools, making up all that we understand as the known and unknown universe. Think about the implications of this. For the practitioner especially, this is a mind-blowing teaching.

To explain in more detail, according to the microcosmic/macrocosmic correspondence, these vast cosmic realities are present and expressed in our human body. This correlation has profound implications for our spiritual journey. It means, first, that our human body is not just one possible gate to the understanding and, beyond that, a direct experience of the cosmic totality. Far more importantly, it means that our human body is actually *the only gate* by which we, in our human incarnation, may have a direct, personal experience of what “is” in the largest sense. In other words, it is possible to have direct, immediate, somatic access to the unmediated presence of all that is. This is Vajrayana 101.

It is only in the human body, in other words—only in our somatic experience—that we can experience and identify with the emptiness “before we were born”² (Chan) and marvel at what arises from that in the form of our own life and the life of all. In Vajrayana, enlightenment is nothing other than arriving in the body and realizing that in it we discover not only the totality of what is but also how it works.

The microcosmic/macrocosmic correspondence is now going to come into play in the earth practice, or what we might also call “earth descent.” In this practice, we are going to connect with the cosmic reality of the earth under us, but at the same time we will see that this cosmic reality cannot be cordoned off from our internal somatic experience. In the earth descent, we will see that both macrocosm (the earth) and microcosm (our body) are the cosmic and internal somatic dimensions of the same reality.

First, put your attention within your body and particularly your lower belly, trying to be fully there. Second, imagine you are opening the entire bottom boundary of your body: your pelvic floor, including the sitz bones, perineum, and anal and genital area. Now imagine yourself opening your entire body into the earth space beneath. So you are opening downward into space, down, down, opening it deeper and deeper into the earth space. Letting go of any separation

between your body's bottom and the earth beneath, let your somatic awareness open and even plunge further and further down.

Now the earth space and your body space are one continuous space. Let there be no boundary or separation between the two. As you continue to open downward, feel the sense of this larger "body," noting the presence and rootedness you are feeling. Notice also the feeling of being held, of safety and protection, when your body and the earth body are not separate but intimately connected and even one in this way. Deep connection with the earth will enable us to weather—to remain with but also be completely open to—any of the storms of intense experience that may arise in our practice as our journey unfolds. As you open your somatic being deeper and deeper, if at any point you feel shaky and disconnected, let the practice go and just rest in a deep and fully relaxed manner in the protective, healing, nourishing space of the earth beneath. Then, when you feel ready, you can pick up the practice again and open further downward.

4. Breathing into the Lower Belly

Next imagine that you are slowly and gently breathing directly into your lower belly. To do this, visualize a spot about four inches below the navel, on your center line, so roughly midway between the perineum and navel. Now imagine yourself bringing the breath directly into that place. Keep breathing in this way until you begin to feel some kind of sensation. As the breath enters, it could be as subtle as a very slight pressure, or it could be more obvious, such as a feeling of coolness and freshness. Keep in mind, we are working with what is called "the inner breath," prana or qi, not the breath coming through our respiratory system. It feels different from the "outer breath," but as we progress the sensation can become quite tangible. As you breathe, visualize that you are opening a space up in and around that spot. In the beginning, we are simply imagining, but as we continue, very real sensations and somatic experiences begin to occur, so stick with it. Keep breathing in this way until you can sense the space opening up and what that space feels like. Let the space open further and expand slightly as you breathe. It could become the size of a hen's egg or even a goose egg. Try to feel the breath coming into that open space, filling and dissolving into it. Try to keep your awareness within this lower belly openness you are developing as you breathe. The longer you are able to carry out this

practice, the more definite your felt sense of this space in the lower belly will become.

These first four steps are critically important for the posture of Pure Awareness for two reasons. First, they help us develop our interoceptive abilities and show us what it feels like to be somatically aware in that way. And, second, they provide the grounded, stable, and rooted-in-our-body feeling—and the somatic confidence that comes along with it—that must underlie any fruitful meditation practice.

According to Chan Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Vajrayana, and also Taoist yoga, the lower belly is the place of origin of our body, our life-force, and our life. There is a gate or portal in the lower belly, called “the secret place” (in Tibetan yoga) or “hara” (in Zen), and on the other side of that portal is primordial reality, “the face before you were born” (Chan and Zen), the origin of all things (Taoism). The gate in the lower belly is where the life-force, in the form of the inner breath, flows into our body. In this practice, we are bringing our attention into the lower belly space, breathing into it to facilitate our awareness there.

This somatic belly-portal and the primordial reality it opens into can become matters of direct experience to us in our practice; in fact, over time, they need to be. When we sit in the posture, we will be developing a sense that breath, life-force, and awareness are flowing into and throughout our incarnate being. Being in felt connection with the primordial origins when we sit provides a further sense of being grounded in what is changeless and real. And this in turn leads to a deeper sense of somatic confidence, well-being, and safety. This is not safety in the ordinary sense of “I am not going to be injured, sick, or die,” which would be quite an illusion. Rather, this somatic confidence is unconditioned; it is the feeling of being ultimately okay, that we are rooted in and an expression of something that gives birth to everything. We feel that nothing on this side of the primordial could ever be a problem because that isn’t what our body ultimately is—it isn’t what we ultimately are.

5. Straight Back

Direct your awareness to your spine and allow it to come into an upright and relaxed alignment. I say “allow,” because your spine already knows

what perfect alignment and relaxed balance are, and, in addition, it knows how to get there. It is just our ego attitude—literally, our posturing—that has thrown this alignment off, perhaps for our entire life. You can check your alignment by moving slightly forward and back, then side to side, to find what feels perfectly upright. This core element of the posture is found when the back is straight, with a feeling of relaxation, alignment, and rising spine. In this case “alignment” does not mean “straight” as we would see it from the outside, but as it is sensed from within. It is the feeling of a back that is upright, relaxed, and aligned without being rigid. “Rising” means a subtle somatic feel of upward flow. Feel this flow along the line of your spine just inside your body. Try to feel how the spine itself and its subtle rising energy are rooted in and emerging from the space of the lower belly. In this step, we are approaching awareness of what is called “the central channel,” a corridor of awareness, often thought of as tubelike in shape, that runs from our perineum up to the top of the head.

When we talk about the rising spine—what I also call “the back line” or “rising back line”—we mean that in the practice there is a feeling, extraordinarily subtle as it may be, of the spine ever lifting and elongating. “Rising spine” refers to the natural upflow of subtle energy along the spine that is simply part of our human somatic experience when we sit quietly with an open, upright, relaxed back. In the beginning, we may not even be able to feel a distinct back line but have to be content with just trying to imagine it there. Later, the experience of it will become quite real, though it may seem circumscribed for a while. In the Tibetan tradition, this back line or central channel is thought of as lying alongside the spine but just in front of it. As I mentioned above, it is visualized as a hollow tube, spacious on the inside. Sometimes it feels very thin, the diameter of a soda straw, and other times like a corridor of space several inches in diameter or even larger.

As we work with the rising spine, we may notice a quality of spaciousness to it. As we shall discover, the space along the back line or within the central channel isn’t just empty. The upflow we experience along the spine is, in fact, the most subtle level of the breath, as mentioned, the very life-force or qi that we have discovered through breathing into the lower belly. In fact, when we sit down to practice, it is important to connect first with the source in the lower belly and then to allow the rising spine to emerge out of that, as its extension. Even when we are working mainly with the rising spine, it is crucial to retain

some sense of its grounding in the lower belly. During our practice of Pure Awareness, over time, we will discover more about this back line space and its immense implications for our posture, our practice, our journey, and our life.

As we are developing the feeling of the straight back, we will notice the uplift of the spine is generally very subtle, and sometimes we won't be able to sense it at all. On certain occasions, in fact, the space may seem entirely empty, just a void. At other times, we will be able to detect, at the very limit of subtlety we can somatically sense, the space moving upward. And at other times still, we may feel the upflow of breath/life-force in a very tangible and discernible way. The feeling of the upright spine with its internal spaciousness and its energetic upflow provides our primary reference point in the practice. When we lose ourselves, we lose the posture, and this means, essentially, losing the empty, open, energetic up-flow of the back line.

The source in the lower belly and the central channel of the back line, then, are participants in one field of primordial space, which emerges in the lower belly and extends in a flow up the spine. The fundamental quality of that basic space is nothing other than our most elemental awareness, the buddha nature in its ultimate form. In the practice of Pure Awareness, this space is what we might call "the witness," the deepest part of ourselves that is beyond space and time, beyond birth and death, and that always knows what's happening with us, is always cognizant, is the ultimate experiencer of our life and all that goes on within it. The witness is quite different from what is often called "the watcher" in meditation, that part of our ego that is standing back and keeping an eye on what is going on in our practice. In the primordial witness, there is nothing whatsoever of the watcher.

Guided Practice II

THE SECOND PRACTICE WILL TAKE us through steps 6 through 9. Let's take a closer look at each of these steps. Remember, if practicing without my oral guidance, that after you have read through the commentary and are ready to actually put these guidelines into practice, you should spend a few minutes grounding yourself by briefly going through the steps of Guided Practice I.

6. Head Lifting

To further arrive at the posture of the straight, relaxed, aligned, and rising spine, next imagine the top of your head lifting toward the heavens. To do this, direct your attention to the back part of the top of your skull, to the crown of the head (the fontanel in infants)—the place about two-thirds of the way back—where the sutures of the skull bones have knitted together. It is from this point that the skull rises upward. It might help you to visualize a cord attached to the fontanel and the head being pulled up. The sense here should be energetic more than strictly physical; we are feeling the rising energy up along the back line, flowing up through the back of our head and naturally causing the head to float upward. As the head floats upward, we feel the spine itself elongate and rise upward as well.

This point in Hindu and Buddhist yoga is known as our *Brahmarandhra* (*randra*, “opening” of or to *Brahman*, “the universal spiritual reality”) and represents the upper end of the central channel. The feeling of uplift opens and elongates the spine and enhances the sense of upflow. In fact, the head lifting should be felt as an extension of the upward movement of the back line or

central channel itself. The subtle upward flow of the spine is expressing itself in the lifting of the head. As the head elevates, feel how this movement provides a greater sense of the openness of the central channel, a greater ease, spaciousness, and freedom all along it.

7. Chin Down

Next, allow your chin to drop gently, almost imperceptibly, toward your chest. Allow it to drop to the end of your range of natural motion and then raise it up just a bit, so there is no feeling of strain or tension, just a sense of relaxation. As you drop your chin, notice how this draws your spine into a more upright and elongated position. Notice also how it opens and frees your spine and promotes a more definite sense of the upflow of energy along the back line.

As you bring your chin down, don't force it. Imagine your chin is descending toward your chest, your neck muscles are relaxing, and your head is rising further as a consequence, but all within a feeling of natural, organic, and relaxed movement. The minute you find yourself forcing your chin down because you think it "should" be lower, back off a little bit. It is a matter of asking your body how much is enough and how much feels like too much. Here, as with all the aspects of the posture, we need to let the body guide us into the right alignment. As the chin comes down and you explore what position feels just right, let the space within the central channel help you. As you drop your chin, look to see how this movement, like the rising head, further opens up the back corridor of space. When you have dropped your chin too much, you will find the space of the central channel in a sense rebelling, becoming more constricted rather than less. As you work with the dropping of your chin, then, you are looking to see what position exactly further opens up the space along the back line.

I think you can see already the way in which the corridor of the central channel really occupies the key position within the practice of Pure Awareness. Everything we are doing in the practice is about opening up and freeing that core of our Soma more and more and more.

8. Ears over Shoulders

Now imagine your ears are traveling straight back, bringing them in the plane of your shoulders. There is a feeling that the ears are continually drifting or moving backward. This step is important because it balances and corrects any tendency of the head to tilt down too far, especially from the chin-dropping step onward.

Slide your ears directly backward, toward the shoulders, until you reach the limit of your range of motion. Then, with your ears leading the way, float the back of your head gently into that zone where you can't go back any further. This gentle leaning into the restriction opens a channel of subtle energy, felt as slightly blissful, that enhances the general spinal uplift and energizes it, particularly in the region of the back of the neck and head. The move opens the back of the neck and the spine more, again enhancing the uplift of the spine even further.

9. Open the Back of the Neck

Now put your attention on the back of your neck, the cervical spine between the top of your torso at shoulder level and the base of your skull. Can you feel any tension or restriction there? Can you feel your neck calling you for some further awareness and relaxation here? Is it providing an internal sense of just what it needs? Attending to your neck, then, letting it be the very focus of your attention right now, feel into it, allowing it to open, elongate, and relax. Let the feeling of this process translate and extend all the way down your spine and then all the way up to the top of your head.

This is an important step in developing a sense of the organic unity of our entire spine from its base to the top of our head, not prioritizing any one part but being equally and somatically present through the whole length of it. Have the sense of this corridor as a whole that is opening, opening, opening, rising, rising, rising.

The opening of the back of the neck should be part of the evolving experience of space along the back line. As the neck opens, the dropping of our chin can become more subtle, accurate, and refined. We are now able more easily to find exactly what chin position opens not only the back of our neck but the whole

expanse of the central channel, from the perineum up to the rising feeling in our back line, including our lifting head. So opening the back of our neck becomes the next enhancement of the space along our back line. Try to feel all the points of posture, up to this one, as part of one integrated, organic, natural opening of that spatial core of our being along the back.

One technique that you may find helpful here is to feel, from the inside, the bump on the back of your head that is located midway between the bottom of the skull and the top, known as the occiput. From the inside, see if you can identify a slightly blissful place in the general area. That will be it. Feel it and begin to breathe under it as if you were gently lifting it straight up with the breath. Many people have found this technique helpful not only for opening the back of the neck but also for arriving at an integrated feel of all the points of posture up to here.

Guided Practice III

THE THIRD PRACTICE WILL TAKE us through steps 10 through 13. We'll now look more closely at each of these steps. Remember, if practicing without my oral guidance, that after you have read through the commentary and are ready to actually put these guidelines into practice, you should spend a few minutes grounding yourself by briefly going through the steps of Guided Practice I and Guided Practice II.

10. Alignment

Having practiced the five previous aspects of working with our back line (steps 5 through 9), we are now in a position to greatly refine our alignment by exploring in more detail the forward-backward and side-to-side movements. Sitting in your upright posture, try moving incrementally forward and backward across the midline to find the spot where your back-to-front alignment feels the most upright, open, and unimpeded. You begin with rather larger movements across the midline, noticing where you cross the center space; it will feel completely empty and open. As you continue, make your movements smaller and smaller, until you are barely deviating from the midline at all. Then rest in that open, empty, effortless midline space.

Now go through exactly the same process with side-to-side movements. In order to find the midpoint in the side-to-side movements, you could visualize your nose arriving in a direct line over your navel. You might sit in front of a mirror to check your alignment or ask a fellow practitioner to stand in front of you to correct your posture.

Now we are going to return to the backward-and-forward and side-to-side movements that were introduced in step 5, the practice of the straight back. At this point, we will be able to be more nuanced in our interoception and the adjustments we make. In terms of the front-to-back alignment, find what you think is the midline, then lean a little too far forward and then a little too far backward. As you repeat this, make the movements smaller and smaller until you feel you have arrived right in the midpoint. When you cross the midline, there will be a sudden sense of opening, space, and “nowhere.”

Then do the same with the side-to-side alignment, moving a little too far one way, then a little too far the other. In terms of the side-to-side movements, check the visual perception, as mentioned above, either in a mirror or through the eyes of someone else. Try to see how the side to side feels to you when the visual says “upright.” In my own case, I always tend to lean a little too far left, and I find I can use the unequal weighting of my sitz bones to tell when I am leaning too much in that direction or have overcompensated by leaning too far to the right.

One problem with leaning too far one way or the other is that the open, unrestricted feeling of the central channel will be compromised. Another problem is that if we are leaning off-center for periods of time, it tends to throw our physical alignment off, and that, as I have learned, is eventually going to cause problems in the knees, hips, and spine, producing stress and sometimes physical pain in our sitting practice.

11. Mouth and Jaw

The jaws should be relaxed, with the lips just touching. The tongue floats inside the mouth, which enhances empty, open awareness. You may need to spend a fair amount of time, perhaps over many meditation sessions, to find out just how tense your jaw is, how to release it, and what it actually feels like when it is in a state of relative relaxation. As you work with your jaw to loosen and relax it, notice the subtle but very definite impact this process has on the overall feeling of awareness, particularly along your back line and most especially in your neck and head region. Notice how it seems to soften, clarify, and open the space further.

Again, experiment and explore. Check the upper and lower jaws. Is there

tension where they meet? Or is it somewhere else? Wherever you find the tension, soften that place and try to relax and release it. Here again, we are looking for a mouth position that is a reflection, an embodiment, of our overall awareness as it has evolved through the previous points of posture. More than this, the positioning of the mouth can be a powerful supplemental practice to take our overall awareness to a deeper and more refined level.

12. Include the Heart

In the journey we have been making so far through the first eleven steps of the posture, something altogether central has been left out: that is our heart. Our heart with all of its subtle feelings has been hovering somewhere in the background, waiting to be included. Some of you may already have been sensing this. In any case, now we need to turn our attention to our heart center, right in the middle of our chest, at heart level.

Have a slight feeling of the heart center softening and opening. Have a sense of the shoulders relaxing and dropping slightly and the scapulae in the back moving toward each other. At this point, having developed such a strong sense of openness in our torso along the back line, we will likely be able to sense all kinds of feeling responses. In Vajrayana Buddhism it is said, “The more space, the more experience.” Our openness makes room in our consciousness for all kinds of subtle feelings, intuitions, and sensations that we had not previously noticed. None of these are random; they are all aspects of experience that have arrived in our Soma but that we have chosen to marginalize, discount, or even completely repress.

In particular, at this time our heart may resonate with an abundance of feeling, subtle yet strong and difficult to name.

It may happen that difficult, painful feelings arise. If so, try to relax, remain grounded in your body, and open to them. They are just separated parts of yourself that want to come back. There may also arise warmth in the form of tenderness, longing, yearning, even incipient love, not for anything specific but as a quality of the heart space itself.

This is a momentous discovery. It is awakening to what our heart actually is and what it actually knows. As you open to your heart, feel the open, empty space of the central channel behind it; this will keep you from fixating too much on any particular feeling and becoming obsessed with or

derailed by it. Just stay connected with the integrity of the central channel space, particularly where it passes behind the heart, and make room in your awareness for whatever feelings begin to brew in your heart.

If anything begins to feel too threatening or overwhelming, just back off your practice, don't try to go any further, and simply rest in your body. Physically back up too: just move your awareness to the back of the body and the central channel and totally relax and let go. Take a break for the day if necessary. This is your journey, and there is no rush.

Just as the space of the earth and the space of the lower belly are ultimately not different but one continuous space, so too the space of the lower belly and that of the central channel are two locations in our body of the very same space. This is the primordial space of the universe, found outside of the envelope of our skin and, most accessibly and experientially, within as well.

As we have seen, this primordial space that we have been feeling in the central channel is not empty. Like in quantum physics and astrophysics, wherein space is conceived as never absolutely vacant and inert but rather has inherently within it certain qualities, a kind of perpetual birthing, so too in our Soma the space is never purely empty but is also birthing. And, as we have already seen in the central channel, what is birthing is some kind of energy.

The space of the primordial Soma is inherently tinged with, even suffused with, warmth. The heart, the seat in our body of subtle feeling and connectedness, is where we feel this, and now in our practice our heart begins to resonate with it. For some, as just mentioned, simply paying attention to the central channel can lead to very intense feelings of all sorts, both painful and pleasurable, restrictive and expansive. Again, these feelings are not about anything external, as we usually suppose. They are, rather, self-existing. They are just how the heart feels right at this moment, how it responds to being alive the more deeply we sense into it.

Sometimes a tightness or tension in the chest area is muscular in addition to being emotional and energetic. Tension—including physical, energetic, and emotional—is, as I have said, our ego's way of freezing against the unwanted, underlying feeling and blocking it out. This dynamic is more active in our heart center than anywhere else in our body precisely because our heart is the nexus of our feeling life. Soften your heart and sense whatever you are feeling there. If you feel totally armored and numb, there is no problem, just be with that. If your

heart presents as tight, restricted, and closed, again, that is fine. Actually, all of these are feelings of the heart, though perhaps they are not quite what we were hoping or looking for. We may feel emotional pain, fear, or pleasure. It really doesn't matter what you are feeling.

There is one very important instruction, though, at this stage. Stay with whatever is going on in your heart without judgment, without evaluation, without even trying to label it. Above all, be mindful of not exiting your somatic feeling into your thinking mind and getting lost in stories, narratives, and the like. In this and the previous steps of the posture, we are developing the capacity to be with the Soma as a total field of experience without needing to step outside to reestablish ego reference points or ground and resisting any temptation to do so.

13. Eyes

Eyes want to be resting downward at a forty-five-degree angle, perhaps half-closed, with a soft focus that reflects the inner intention of our practice. Feel the central channel space, the open, empty awareness, as it passes behind your eyes. Let the attention of your eyes gently surrender backward. Relax and open your gaze backward, as if it is the back part of your eyes that is seeing rather than the habitual frontal focus. Again, remaining within the central channel, this time as it passes behind the eyes, see how the central channel receives visual impressions, how it “sees.”

Rest your attention toward the back of your eyeballs. To provide an inner sensorial reference point, you might try to feel the point of connection with your optic nerve, at the back and in the lower half of the eyeballs. Again, when you find it, you may discover a slightly pleasurable, even subtly blissful feeling, and it may help you rest in this eye position. Now open this optical feeling a little further back into the central channel behind the eyes. Rest there and just let the visual impressions be as they are, without interfering in any way. In other words, don't bring your attention to the front of your eyes and begin to actively look; certainly don't label the visual impressions and begin to think about them. If this occurs, just return your attention to the back of your eyes and open behind that into the central channel. Ask yourself how the primordial somatic space of the central channel itself sees. This instruction enables us to begin to sense how the eyes do in fact see when not engaged in recognizing or intentional seeing. Rest

in how the Soma sees, in a visual sense that is beyond labels and judgments.

Guided Practice IV

THE FOURTH PRACTICE WILL TAKE us through the remaining steps, which are steps 14 through 17. We'll now look more closely at each of these steps. Remember, if practicing without my oral guidance, that after you have read through the commentary and are ready to actually put these guidelines into practice, you should spend a few minutes grounding yourself by briefly going through the steps of Guided Practices I, II, and III.

14. Hands

There are some choices here. The hands can be held in the Zen cosmic mudra, palms up, one hand nesting in the other, thumbs touching, forming an open circle in front of the lower belly space (the hara in Zen), just below the navel. They may be placed Tibetan style, palms down on the thighs or knees. Or you can simply rest your folded hands in your lap. What hand position you choose will depend on what kind of meditation seat you are using, your own physiognomy, and the imponderable of what feels just right to you. What hand posture best enhances the general feeling of openness in your central channel and, more and more, your torso and body as a whole? Again, experiment with your hand position and feel the impact on the overall somatic awareness that is now becoming more and more available to you.

When you do this, try to feel how the way you are holding your hands impacts your overall feeling of awareness in the previous points of posture. We are not talking here just about how a certain position feels physically—though this is

important—but about what the global feeling is. This involves connecting with the awareness in your Soma as a whole and sensing its qualities, such as ease and brightness. It takes a little time to develop this extraordinarily refined interoceptive capacity, but we are often surprised by how quickly that sense comes.

Experiment and explore. What hand position feels, from the inside, like it best represents or mirrors or, better yet, embodies and encourages the awareness of the first thirteen points of posture? Don't be looking for a boilerplate hand position you can always use, irrespective of your state of mind or how you are feeling on a given day. In your practice sessions, you may need to vary your hand positions as befitting what's going on with you and your awareness. Overall, the posture of your meditation needs to feel like one unified, organic process to which all the points of posture contribute.

15. Breath

As we attend to the elements of the posture just described, we become aware of our breath: we notice we are breathing in and breathing out. The way to practice with the breath is not to do anything with it. It doesn't matter whether it is fast or slow, superficial or deep, labored or relaxed, pleasant or unpleasant; in no way do we try to manipulate, alter, or change it. We simply note it as part of the developing experience of our body in the posture and leave it completely alone—leave it “in its own place,” as is said—to be whatever it wants to be. As you sit, perhaps you will sense the breath arriving in your lower belly and moving almost imperceptibly up your central channel. If so, just touch this very, very lightly, as if your breath is so subtle and refined that it almost seems like awareness itself.

When we do leave the breath as is, in its own place, a process of discovery can begin to unfold. In being with our breath, attending to it but not interfering or meddling with its natural process, we begin to develop a conscious and ever-deepening relationship with the inner breath, of which the outer breath is the outer shell. As our practice of Pure Awareness deepens and evolves, our attention will naturally reside much more within the inner breath, and that subtle breath will become an essential guide.

Follow the breath without any conscious intention, direction, or manipulation. According to the esoteric traditions of Chan, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism and Taoism, not only does the breath reflect our body, it *is* our body in all its specificity and detail, just in a more refined form. Feeling the breath as an aspect of the posture is feeling the whole body, but at a more subtle level. Put another way, if you are feeling your body and you are feeling down to a subtle enough level of it, you are feeling the breath. They are not two things but, rather, two levels of experiencing the same thing.

As we practice the Pure Awareness posture, without any deliberate intention on our part we may find ourselves subtly aware of the breath's point of origin in the lower belly. We may discover ourselves aware of how the breath is emerging from this point of emptiness and moving upward. If so, feel how the posture is rooted there in the breath of the lower belly and how the posture arises naturally out of the upward movement of the breath.

In practicing with the breath, there is one exception to the rule of no manipulation. When we are feeling particularly agitated, stirred up, or unusually distracted, as we try to bring ourselves back to our posture, we may find ourselves repeatedly exiting into discursive thinking, losing any sense of meditating or of our body for periods of time. In such instances, it may be helpful to deliberately anchor our attention in the lower belly, either just resting the focus there or gently and lightly breathing into it, opening the space, feeling the breath there, and letting the posture arrange itself around that.

16. Be in the Soma

This is an important step, for it gathers together what the first fifteen steps want to lead to and is the main intention of the entire practice: allow your awareness to inhabit and pervade your body as a whole. As much as possible, merge your awareness into the Soma; just be in your body, be your Soma. In this step, the posture arrives at a kind of fruition, and once we sense this totality of the Soma, another, further journey begins to open up.

Here we are bringing a fully invigorated, embodied somatic presence into our practice of Pure Awareness. Within our body, we are opening to whatever the sense of the totality of the posture is and just being present to it. Nothing can

really be said about the feel of what we are present to here. There will be things we might normally label as physical sensations, energy, feelings, emotions, and so on, but it is important to avoid any kind of categorizations or identifications. Now we are called to feel everything as one overall fabric of our somatic experience at this moment. The overall feel of our body at that instant will be utterly unique, beyond any kind of words, discriminations, or labels. We will simply be there, in a state of ineffable somatic awareness, presence, aliveness, and knowingness. Here we are touching not just the mind of the Buddha but the very being of Buddha, our own awakened, embodied existence as complete human beings in this life.

17. Don't Move

This means that for the duration of our meditation session (normally forty to forty-five minutes), we commit to remaining in the posture of Pure Awareness without moving. While resisting the demands of impulse to fidget, squirm, or shift around on your meditation cushion, explore your experience. Take great interest in the play of your mind when you want to move but do not give in to the impulse and remain unmoving.

When we sit down to practice, before we begin it is important to establish the length of time we are going to sit and to commit to it. Because of the demanding nature of this somatic practice, sessions might generally vary anywhere from thirty to sixty minutes in length, though forty to forty-five minutes is a good average to aim for. Longer is not necessarily better. Thirty minutes in which you are able to really be present are far better than fifty minutes of fighting it the whole way and constantly looking at the clock. But set the time of your session before you begin and don't change it. The ego is going to fight and scream from time to time. That is part of the process—and, perhaps surprisingly, where most of the transformation is likely to occur.

Personally, I try to gauge how much time I want to sit according to my state of being. If I stayed up too late the night before, working on my computer, I am likely to wake up with a mind that is muddy and discursive and a body that is anxious and restless. If that is the situation, I know that it is most likely going to take me half an hour or more just to settle down. In that case, I may give myself a longer sitting session so I have time to actually arrive in my body and then begin to connect meaningfully with my Soma.

Another approach to the same problem is to decide on perhaps two sessions of thirty or thirty-five minutes each. Take a break in between; don't do anything, just sit and be. Keep the break short so you don't reactivate or agitate yourself. Then try again. This can be a great way to deal with a mind that is a mess.

I do realize that today those who are beginning to meditate are often advised to practice for just five or ten minutes. I appreciate the motivation of this instruction: instructors do not want to be too off-putting for new practitioners, and in the beginning this may be the best advice. But if this becomes a long-term approach—if people are not encouraged to ask more of themselves than that—they may miss what meditation is really about: connecting deeply with their own basic state of being. Especially through the somatic practice, we can learn how to be within a field of awareness that is open, empty, bright, and free, with the entire world displayed before us. We mustn't sell ourselves short by hanging on too long to approaches that seem too easy and have lost their challenge.

“Don't move” means that when we are beginning a meditation session, we assume our posture. Ideally, we will systematically go through each element of the practice, so that we inhabit the posture as fully as possible: finding the right meditation seat, arriving in our body, grounding, breathing into the lower belly, coming into a straight back, lifting the head, dropping the chin, moving the ears back, opening the back of the neck, aligning the nose over the navel, elongating our spine or back line at each stage, and so on. We are going through these steps not to arrive at “the perfect posture” but as a kind of “warm-up” to facilitate a process of aligning our consciousness with our Soma—really tapping into the Soma's own boundless awareness and entering fully and completely into it. In fact, this full entry is the only meaningful way to talk about “getting” the posture. Then we remain within the posture we have taken without moving—at all—for the duration of the session. At a certain point, not moving becomes the most relaxed, natural, and desirable thing you could imagine.

Why is the “no moving” instruction so important? The essential point of the rigorous discipline of practice is to create a flawless mirror in which we are able to see our impulses clearly, to notice their rise, their insistent, nearly irresistible compulsion. This is a necessary precursor to realizing that, if left unacted upon, they eventually fall away into nothing. Most importantly, by simply sitting through the phenomena of impulse with awareness and relaxation, but not going any further by acting out, we are short-circuiting our habitual process of recreating and reinforcing the idea of a solid self, a truly existent “me.”

Let's review how this works. Skandha 3, impulse, gives us the message "You must act thus to survive." Under normal circumstances, when we take literally and believe this message, that reinforces the idea of a solid self. When we then, in skandhas 4 and 5, begin to apply familiarizing and rationalizing labels and judgments to our impulsive action, we further strengthen our idea of a truly existent, substantial "me." And when we apply these reinforcements to conceptualizing our self as a person who had to have something and tried to get it, the impression of a discrete ego that needs to be sustained reaches maturity and is fully reinforced. However, when we boycott impulse and let it dissolve unacted upon, instead of moving forward to a strengthened left-brain concept of our small and solid self, we move backward into our somatic awareness, into the open, uncultivated field of being.

Assuming the posture and trying to remain continuously present to it, we notice how restless and unsteady our mind is. One impulse after another pops up: to get a coffee, find something to eat, talk to someone, check our e-mail, surf the Internet, buy an item of clothing, initiate a new project, order a book, take a road trip, even get up and open a window or turn on the light. Many, many ideas arise about what we would like to do right now, and many, many plans occur about what we are going to do after our meditation session. The experience can actually be very claustrophobic. However, because of our commitment to our meditation session, we just sit there, leaning further and further into the posture. Impulse, being the linchpin of our ego, holds our egotism together and is therefore the point at which we can dismantle the entire ego process.

All the avenues for impulse gratification are thus taken off-line during our practice session—all but one that might remain and that could be especially problematic: the impulse to move, fidget, squirm around, constantly adjust ourselves to find a more comfortable position. This can become a compelling and almost irresistible possibility. Here is impulse arriving once again, but hidden behind a mask that is most alluring. The longer we sit without moving, the more claustrophobic we may feel and the more we may feel achiness or soreness as almost unbearable; more than anything, we want to shift, move just slightly, or at least scratch.

If we do succumb to this temptation, it is like shaking or jiggling the mirror of Pure Awareness—we can no longer see what it is reflecting. When we give in to impulse, even the subtle impulse to move a bit, we are acting out; we are looking for pleasure: we are suddenly absent from the posture and abruptly lose the possibility of the expansive, open awareness that identifying with the posture

brings. In the moment of yielding to impulse and seeking gratification, in this case the gratification and relief of moving our hand slightly, we might as well—almost—be blindly sipping a cappuccino. By not moving, we are able to see more and more clearly how endlessly restless, agitated, and impulsive we are, how unable we are to simply rest and be with what is. Of course, unlike the cappuccino sipping, the instant we notice we have moved or even are about to move, we are back; we can settle into the back line once more and continue on our journey.

In the beginning, the “don’t move” instruction may feel highly restrictive and even imprisoning, but this will likely soften over time. Eventually, we may be glad of the instruction because it will allow the interior space to be so much more open, easy, natural, and complete. Over time, relieved of the option of constantly adjusting ourselves to be more comfortable, we may find that our practice grows much deeper, more peaceful, and more nourishing and satisfying.

The “don’t move” instruction is one of the great gifts of Zen Buddhism to meditators. It is true that experienced meditators in the other major Buddhist lineages eventually figure this out for themselves. But I think that offering this instruction to practitioners at the very beginning can be a most helpful support to their meditation. I do hear Zen students say, from time to time, that in their experience the “don’t move” instruction comes off as aggressive or too controlling. Of course, as with any instruction, this kind of excess is an ever-present possibility. But “don’t move” can be understood as a gentle and—yes—relaxed way of being on our meditation cushion and, as I say, a gateway to the depths of being we seek.

“No moving” means no intentional moving. At the same time, by virtue of our breathing, our heartbeat, the flow of blood and lymph throughout our system, spontaneous muscular contraction and relaxation, and all our neurological activity, in actual fact our body is not motionless at all. The more stillness and presence we feel in our practice, the more we will notice that our body is in perpetual motion. For example, with each in-breath, our diaphragm descends, our lower belly expands out slightly, our sacrum tips forward, and in a lever-like action our spine lifts, effecting motion in our pelvis, legs, torso, shoulders, arms, neck, and head. The fluids of the spinal column are pumping and flowing, and so are the other fluids throughout our body. Ida Rolf, the founder of Rolfing, used to say that when we are fully present and relaxed, the breathing causes even the sutures in the skull to move.

These micromovements, this continual undulating back and forth, is extraordinarily subtle. But as we settle, we not only feel them but do so with increasing clarity; and we find they are actually quite pleasurable. Now we can begin to move our attention to the inner dynamic of the body's continual movement. While in the beginning these micromovements feel physical, over time they seem more related to the subtle energy and the breath flowing throughout the body. At this point, the “don't move” rule, far from seeming a restriction, in fact opens up a compelling and increasingly unlimited interior world of living experience. Immersed in this fascinating and blissful inner field, any felt need for exterior movement vanishes. In fact, we see that if we succumb to the temptation to move around in our posture, we will lose touch with the endless possibilities of this infinite interior landscape.

At the same time, there are moments when it is clear that we actually do need to move in the more ordinary way. For example, if we have an injury or a vulnerability—say, in our knee or our back—and not moving means pushing our body toward retraumatization, obviously we need to move. But in the next session, we should take a different seating posture—even lying down if we have to—so that we can again take up the practice of not moving. As another example, if we get a painful leg cramp while sitting, we are going to have to—and should—move to release it.

At least in the Vajrayana practicing lineage, with its respect for the body, in such cases the notion of some kind of macho “pushing through bad pain” has no place; it is misguided. This is because it sets up a freezing of body and mind, producing mental rigidity and its companion, agitation; and it can be extremely hurtful not only to our body but to our practice and our journey. In the Vajrayana approach, it is always said that the only way you can ever get into trouble is by trying to push or force your practice according to your or somebody else's ideas. The priority is and must always be on listening to our body and allowing the somatic wisdom available at the boundary of consciousness to guide us.

To ignore our somatic experience, then, with some hypervigilant, aggressive override based on some concept we may have of “good practice” is always wrong. There are two mistakes one commonly finds in Western Buddhism. The first is being too lax, self-indulgent (giving in to impulse), and sloppy; the second is being too hypermasculine, macho, and militaristic.¹ Of these two, the second can be more difficult to recognize because, by masquerading as “good practice,” it can harm us and impede our own development, perhaps for a long

time. When you have a whole community engaged in the macho approach, it can be even harder to acknowledge the fault. Listen to the body, trust the body, follow the body, and your practice will always remain in the fast-moving river of the journey, headed to the boundless ocean of realization.

As we become more and more aware of what is going on when we meditate, we notice something very interesting: when we want to move, it is almost always in response to some painful thought, image, memory, insight, or feeling that has just popped up. This is subtle. Normally we are not aware of the painful occurrence; we just feel we have to move. It is as if a sharp object were just beginning to be pressed against our skin, and we suddenly—impulsively—move to get away from it. What is going on here?

In fact, when we move in response to some impending mental or emotional distress rather than staying with it and fully experiencing it, we are diverting our attention from it and blocking it out. We are, in effect, pushing it back into our unconscious, repressing it into the darkness of our Soma. This is a most delicate process, and it is only over time that we begin to see clearly how it works. So compelling is the desire to move when we experience a moment of psychological pain that, even when we are practicing with a strong commitment to not moving, sometimes we do move without any conscious intention to do so. We realize only in hindsight that this was in response to some painful feeling, but now it is gone; we just glimpsed it but never gave ourselves the chance to experience it.

In the beginning, it can be very difficult to see our desire to move during sitting for what it really is, and we find all kinds of ways to justify it. One of my students, early in her sitting practice, objected strongly to the instruction to not move during sessions. She said, “I am a dancer, and my body has to continually move to express itself. I feel that if I don’t move I am denying and disrespecting my body.” Of course, I am always talking about the importance of listening to and respecting one’s body, so I was a bit flummoxed about how to respond. I did point to the continuous micromovements that happen even when we are sitting “still,” to the fact that our body is never in a static state, but this fell on deaf ears. So I arranged for her to sit in the back of the meditation hall and said that for now it was okay for her to move around, rock, sway, shift however her body was telling her she had to, as long as this didn’t disturb others, and to keep tuned to see what she might find out.

Then one night, we were all watching an engrossing video on meditation and

social action, and I noticed that for a full forty-five minutes she sat stock-still, without the least movement. The next day in an interview I pointed this fact out to her. She got it right away. We talked, and she began to wonder out loud whether it was really her somatic being that refused to remain still; she began to uncover some unconscious fear that if she couldn't move whenever she felt the urge, something terrible—and nameless—would happen. Her insight shifted the focus of her practice, and a new and quite creative process of inner exploration and discovery began for her.

Early in my teaching of meditation, I myself came upon a similar insight, though approached from a different direction. I was leading a monthlong meditation intensive. Sometime in the first week, we were practicing late into the evening. All of us were feeling overcome by tired and aching bodies. I was sitting there in the practice leader's seat at the front of the meditation hall, my body one big mass of pain, trying to stay with the practice; but all I wanted to do was move, and all I could think was, "I can't stand one more second; this session feels like an eternity in hell." I just wanted to jump up and run out of the room, lie down, anything but this. I was holding on to something for dear life—but what? I felt like somebody who is hanging off the edge of a cliff and beginning to lose his grip. You could feel that everyone else there was having some version of this unbearable claustrophobia. And so we sat.

But then, all of a sudden, something shifted, and not just in me. With the abruptness of a lightning strike, I let go of something—or, I should say, something let go. I was completely and fully present in my body, but all the pain and soreness had vanished, and I felt completely relaxed and at ease. There was no more resistance; I was completely there. At the same time, there was a feeling of tremendous peace in the room—everyone else seemed to be sensing the very same thing—and the blissfulness of the body was wondrous. From thinking, just a moment before, "I can't stand one more second of this nightmare," now I felt that this was the only thing I ever wanted to do, never to do anything else but just sit there, in that meditation hall, with these exact people, forever.

This meditation experience, which is quite common in group and solitary retreats, underlined for me how much our physical discomfort in our meditation practice, our claustrophobia, and our urge to move are all connected with the impulsiveness of our ego and its desire to survive.

PART FOUR

Cultivating the Empty Field

A Closer Look at Feeling and Impulse

THE TITLE OF THIS SECTION of the book, “Cultivating the Empty Field,” evokes a beautiful phrase taken from the title of a book on Chan Buddhism about how we may develop the practice of Pure Awareness.¹ The field in question is always and ever empty; it is empty at the beginning of the journey, empty in the middle, and empty at the end. The field, which is nothing other than our own awakened state, never departs from its own nature as empty, open, and free. This haunting phrase means to say that when we carry out the practice with all the vigor and devotion we can muster, we are not creating or bringing about anything definitive, solid, or real, at least in the ordinary sense. What we are cultivating is the boundless emptiness itself, so that it may show itself more and more for what it truly is.

In the suggestions, guidelines, and practical tips that follow in the next eight chapters, it is most important to keep this constantly in mind. The practice of Pure Awareness is all about emptiness and what, over time, we find in it, and nothing more.

Breaking Down the Dynamics of Impulse

As we have seen, our ordinary human experience is not a solid thing, but arises and falls away moment by moment. It is our ego that attributes continuity to what is essentially impermanent and full of holes. Each new moment of experience begins with the basic space of the groundless ground, the infinite space of our Soma at its deepest level; and that space, as part of its very nature, is highly energized. Because that space of our basic awareness is infinite, without reference points, and its energy is unbounded, when we encounter it our

ego instantly freaks out, retracting, trying to find solid ground, and trying to reform itself.

Let's review the skandha process in order to understand more fully how we can work with feeling and impulse in our practice. In the first skandha, ignorance-form, we abruptly pull back from that space and objectify it as a threatening "other." In the second skandha, feeling-evaluation, we attach rudimentary feeling qualities to it—either pain, pleasure, or neutrality—to try to begin to orient ourselves. In the third skandha, impulse, we react to that feeling-evaluation by trying to push away whatever is painful, pull in whatever is pleasurable, and deliberately ignore everything else.

For the practitioner, the most interesting and important moment in the formation of ego is, as we have seen, the jump from feeling-evaluation to impulse. In our meditation practice, the basic separation of skandha 1 and the feeling of skandha 2 are givens. To use Buddhist terminology, the basic sense of separation from groundless form and how we feel in relation to it are the result of past actions, past karma. We can't do anything about those givens. We can't erase what has already occurred nor the results past actions have produced. The current situation and the particular feelings are just there, the givenness of our life at this moment.

Does this mean that there is no human freedom? No, not at all. In fact, at the point of the arising of impulse, that is precisely where we have the freedom to make a very real and all-important choice. Depending on how we exercise our freedom, depending on the choices we make with arising impulse, our life could run along in its customary dreary rut, or we could find ourselves really and truly free.

In the third skandha, then, we do have agency. If, through our somatic practice, we are able to drop beneath our thinking mind, skandhas 4 (karmic formations) and 5 (defensive consciousness), and into the experiential domain of the body, then something very interesting becomes possible. Ordinarily we are not aware of impulse and its dynamics but just find ourselves in the midst of our reactivity, either going after something, retracting from something, or ignoring something. In fact, most often we are so lost in our thinking about what we are trying to do, we are not even conscious of the emotional charge behind our actions. At this point, although we may think we are exercising our freedom, there is no freedom whatsoever: we are just being driven along and entirely controlled by impulse.

However, coming into the body through the posture of Pure Awareness, we gradually become somatically aware of the dynamics of impulse. I say “somatically aware” because the signature of impulse is somatic; that is why we can’t see it when we are lost in our thinking mind. Impulse, in fact, feels like an upsurge, a tightening of our body (especially our chest), a coalescing of our energy toward the object of our desire, shutting down the space of our awareness. When we are within the posture, the arising of impulse is actually quite an unpleasant experience. It is so *driven*!

Impulse pulls us instantly out of the posture and we lose our sense of openness and spaciousness. We are still at least partially in our body, though, and we are able to feel what just occurred. The technique at this moment is simply to return to our body; leave the impulse alone and just come back and feel into the posture once more. But the particular impulse may be quite insistent. Either it won’t let us come back fully into the posture, or we do come back but then it pulls us out again. So the practice here is just, over and over, to come back, come back, come back.

If we keep coming back into the posture each time we lose it, eventually the impulse weakens, then it tires, and finally it just gives up. This process of exhausting a particular impulse doesn’t necessarily take forever. In fact, in my experience, it may take only a few minutes. But to give the process a few minutes when the impulse is really strong is no small thing. In our tradition it is said that one should take the attitude of being ruthless toward impulse’s distraction. Just set your mind that you are not going to let it have its way.

On certain days, we are just in an impulsive frame of mind. As soon as one impulse dissolves, another jumps right in and takes its place. We find the entire meditation session is made up of our being hijacked by impulse and then coming back, over and over. Those days, at least for me, are quite difficult and unfulfilling. But, as I’ve said, this is likely where we are doing our most important work. Every time we come back, we are undermining impulse’s hold over us, not just this one impulse that is arising right now, but impulse in general. We are in the process of fundamentally altering the level of investment we habitually have in following our impulses; we are developing our investment in being the body even while impulse tugs at us. We are actually changing our neurological wiring.

Sitting with the Feelings

As we keep working with ourselves in this way, increasingly we find moments when impulse, skandha 3, along with skandhas 4 and 5, have completely exited from the scene. This can be a challenging moment, for initially we find we are left with the threatening and unmanageable skandha 2, feeling-evaluation. We are left with whatever feelings we did not want to feel and were using impulse to avoid. At this point, we need to hang out with these feelings. A part of us will just be wanting to run, to escape. Impulse will be pulling at our sleeve—if not grabbing us by the throat—saying, “Just come with me, and you won’t have to feel this discomfort.” Our job here is simply to stay with the painful or disturbing affects. And the way we stay with them is to stay in our body, for that is where feeling-evaluation shows itself and is experienced. We only need to keep coming back, being in our body, and opening, as fully and bravely as we can, to what we are feeling.

This process of staying present in our body with the uncomfortable or painful feeling-evaluation makes up a great deal of the kind of somatic meditation we are doing. But it is not only a challenging and sometimes daunting process. For feeling itself—and I mean here feeling-evaluation, this skandha of grasping—is making a journey. There is something it is here for, something it wants to show us, something we need to be shown about it—something about our greater life. Neurotic feeling is, thus, a portal. When feeling-evaluation is able to deliver its message—meaning we are staying with it without judgment or evaluation for as long as it wants—then something further happens.

Suddenly, we find ourselves fully and completely in the open, peaceful, joyful space of the Soma. The point of the postural practice, as I’ve said, is that such moments, in the beginning few and far between, eventually occur more frequently. They begin to maintain themselves, not just for a moment, but for a few seconds, then longer.

And within such moments something extraordinarily important is occurring. We have already talked about boycotting impulse and undercutting its momentum into karmic formations and defensive consciousness, skandhas 4 and 5. But what happens to ignorance-form and feeling-evaluation, skandhas 1 and 2? Don’t we now have to dismantle them?

The answer is no. When impulse, karmic formations, and defensive consciousness are taken off-line and when feeling-evaluation has delivered its message, then we find ourselves entirely within the Soma; we find ourselves in a new and different world. We have dropped beneath the thinking mind into the

subcortical regions of our Soma. We have “touched enlightenment with our body,” as the texts say. We have come upon the Great Wisdom that is found in the body.

When we take a look, amazingly, we find that ignorance-form is no longer anywhere to be seen. Suddenly, the vast space of Dharmakaya is spread out before us, like an infinite carpet of light. In fact, even more than this, there is not the least iota of self-consciousness; there is no watcher. There is just the awakened state, awareness aware of itself. And what about feeling-evaluation? In the same way, that particular upadana skandha is nowhere to be seen. It has fulfilled itself and dissolved back into basic space. Now there is just the energy of the awakened state, “something to experience,” the endless play of what is called “self-born awareness,” *rangjung yeshe* in Tibetan.

I want to reemphasize here, because you may already be glimpsing this in your practice, that the awakened state is not an empty space; it is not a void. There is a great deal going on. I am referring to this “what is going on” with the words “something to experience.” It infinitely surpasses any language we could possibly come up with. The only human forms of expression that are really directly helpful in opening our eyes are the artistic ones: poetry, visual art, music, dance, and so on. Art does not exactly embody “something to experience,” but in the hands of accomplished people, it functions as an open portal. It can instigate our own direct experience of the awakened state with all of its unfathomable color, movement, dynamism, and life.

Still, the Vajrayana tradition does speak a little about this liberated feeling, the expressive dimension of the awakened state, this anupadana or nonneurotic feeling function. For example, philosophically it is sometimes called “pure relative truth.” This means that experientially it is *something*, but it manifests itself entirely independently of thinking or language. It is referred to as the “energy of awareness,” “the luminosity of emptiness,” and “the radiance of awareness.” It is also called “pure experience,” “pure perception,” or “sacred outlook.” Or, again, “naked experience,” “the way things are,” “the thusness of reality,” and so on. It is “the sacred world” we sometimes hear about. All these ways of speaking are indicators of something that exists in a different reality than the one posited and captured by language. The important point, though, is that *there is a very great deal to experience* within the infinite terrain of enlightenment; it’s just that if you try to label it, think about it, or pin it down, suddenly it is gone. I will have more to say about this “energy of awareness” later.

Working with Feeling and Impulse on and off the Cushion

MOST OF THE TIME DURING meditation, we are not abiding fully within the Soma but more on the fringes, working with the posture of Pure Awareness to come back over and over and hanging out with the discomfort that we feel once impulse has been recognized and boycotted. Most of our time on the meditation cushion, then, consists of the demanding, unromantic, often monotonous process of returning, returning, returning to the body. In this and the next few chapters, I want to talk in more detail about this gritty, rather sober, often tedious work.

The purpose of feeling, obviously, is to be felt. Here I am talking about the neurotic-type feeling-evaluation, the skandha of grasping, because that is generally the only kind of feeling we have access to in the beginning.

So what I am saying here is crucial: the purpose of feeling-evaluation is to be felt—felt fully, thoroughly, and completely. And we need to be with it and feel it for as long as it shows itself in our body. This is not an easy thing because it is precisely these uncomfortable or painful feelings that we have been avoiding all these years by resorting to the escape route of impulse, which takes us into our thinking mind, where we don't have to feel anything. So staying with the feeling in our body requires clarity of purpose, perseverance, and fortitude. Perhaps you can see now why meditation that is grounded in the body is so critical; it is in the body alone where we can be with feeling-evaluation fully and allow its process to occur. Without being in our body, without fully sensing feeling-evaluation, psychological and spiritual transformation becomes impossible. This is why if we are left-brain, mental meditators, so often even after decades of practice not much really changes in our basic state of being.

In this sense, how we are working with feeling-evaluation in our practice is quite different from the way we work with impulse, karmic formations, or defensive consciousness. With karmic formation and defensive consciousness, by coming into our body, we leave them aside. If they try to take us over, we just come back and basically ignore them. As we come into our body more fully, we discover impulse in a direct, naked, and somatic way; this gives us the leverage to see it, feel its pull, and refuse to go along with its urgencies and dictates. Doing so lays bare what is going on underneath, feeling-evaluation. And this, by definition, is painful, threatening, and most difficult to be with. To say again, that is why impulse is so seductive and difficult to resist.

In the (somewhat hypothetical) healthy operation of the human person, we are constantly feeling about everything that arises in our experience, down to an unimaginable level of subtlety and refinement; and we are making room for it, simply feeling and letting the feeling run its own course. In this healthy scenario, feeling is felt fully, and whatever needs to happen by way of that full and natural feeling happens. There is no resistance whatsoever. And so there is no hangover, there are no “karmic consequences,” no matter how painful or pleasurable or irrelevant that feeling may initially have been sensed to be. This is, so it is said, how enlightened people work.

But this isn’t how it typically works in the case of the neurotic ego. Feeling comes up as feeling-evaluation, with all of its pain and threat. As this begins to make itself known, we immediately jump to impulsive reactivity; we turn away from feeling and into our thinking mind. Then feeling never gets to fulfill its purpose in being, so to speak. Feeling-evaluation has come up because, in order to resolve itself, it needs to be fully felt and experienced. If we turn away, it never gets to fulfill this purpose, to live out its own life process and destiny. Without feeling-evaluation’s appearance and without our being willing to be with it, there can be no journey. This is why, in the Vajrayana, feeling-evaluation—so basic to human neurosis—is considered sacred.

When the life and purpose of feeling—whatever it was—goes underground, it continues to affect us, but from the shadows. As Jung said, a huge charge builds up in the unconscious, and it leads to ill health, both physical and mental. We see this very markedly in the case of the extremely intense feelings associated with trauma. That process is, again, what Buddhism calls “the creation of karma.” The energy of the original feeling is repressed and perverted into the formation of all kinds of habitual patterns of avoidance, evasion, and denial. And these do become habits of response to our life as a whole.

Thus, our practice is constantly to work with the posture of Pure Awareness, let our thoughts go, descend into the body, boycott impulse, and stay with feeling, whatever it is—stay with feeling without imposing labels, judgments, or story lines. According to Trungpa Rinpoche, speaking for the Vajrayana, feeling is a living energy and a living force, almost at the level of being an entity.¹ It has arisen to make a journey. And the journey it wants to make is to free itself and fulfill itself. According to Rinpoche that is how karma is exhausted: by uncovering feeling, which is a somatic experience, and staying with it until it completes its journey.

When in the practice of Pure Awareness we remain within the somatic space, we are giving feeling full license to show itself and express itself; we get to hold it in our somatic being, explore it, and see where it wants to go. No longer are we running away from it, exiting into our thinking mind, and cutting off the journey that needs to happen. But we are going to be able to do this only by remaining within the container of our posture, letting it hold our awareness as a glass holds water. The body is the container of the journey of feeling. It not only gives us the opportunity to let that happen, but in addition provides the groundedness and the somatic confidence for us to be able to be with this process.

When We Don't Act on Impulse

Let's look at a simple example. In daily experience, we might notice that when we are feeling slightly uneasy, we suddenly find ourselves in the kitchen making a cup of coffee. Now, if a similar experience occurs while we are meditating, the whole thing becomes a lot more interesting, full of texture, and instructive. So now imagine we are sitting within the somatic space of meditation. Suddenly we feel anxious, and normally we would run to the kitchen, but we can't. As we sit with our anxiety, we come to realize it is about a person we have to meet later today, maybe our dentist to have a cavity filled. We begin to think about this future meeting but then bring ourselves back to our Soma. Inwardly, we are twisting and turning, wanting to get away from the painful, anxious feeling.

A thought pops up: "I want a cup of coffee; a cup of coffee right now would make me feel better." However, this is not exactly a conscious thought; rather, it is the voice of impulse, which makes it far more compelling. Suddenly this plain cup of coffee becomes a fragrant, savory cup of cappuccino with frothy milk and

just the right amount of nutmeg. But then we pull ourselves back to our Soma. We want to go from the painful feeling to impulsive action, but right now we are sitting, and we have fifteen more minutes to go, so there isn't really anything for impulse to do but indulge in fantasies. However, every time it goes there, we know what that dissociating feeling is like, and while it has an appeal, it also feels horrible, small, and yucky. Remembering our commitment to our practice, we just pull ourselves back into our Soma. We discover, perhaps surprisingly, that it actually feels terrible to be disembodied.

The interesting thing is that at a certain point the impulse gives up. In fact, impulse can only assert itself for a relatively short period of time before it just dissolves. It is likely that if we don't act on impulse, the original anxiety, which led us to want that fragrant cappuccino so badly, will make its own journey. If we stay with it rather than running, it is likely to change or broaden out in some way so that we can see more of the situation. As this occurs, we actually may forget entirely about the cup of cappuccino, which a moment ago was so entrancing. We may realize that while there may be some discomfort in our dentist trip, it will free us from this toothache. And maybe we will remember we actually like the dentist and are looking forward to seeing him or her, and the drive to the dentist's office along the river is rather beautiful at that time of day. The fear of pain that hooked us now becomes a minor player as the picture becomes bigger and bigger.

With the death of the original impulse, we thus find we awaken into a much larger world, less self-involved and far more compelling. We are glimpsing the basic space of our nature and "what there is to experience." "What there is to experience" is this much bigger world. And it is not the humdrum, ordinary world implied by the terms "dentist," "drive," "river," and so on. This new world dawns on us with freshness, surprise, and vitality, drawing onward our inspiration, curiosity, and excitement. But of course even these words don't capture it—we can only say, "Oh, this is what there is to be experienced," unexpected and unprecedented as it shows itself to be. This is the world of the Soma, what it has held for us all along and has been waiting for us to discover. Let's now look once again at impulse and refine our understanding. Importantly, by going through this process in our meditation over and over, we begin to become quite familiar with this difficult companion of ours, impulse. Impulse is always pushy and demanding, and when it is pulling at us, we can feel ourselves shutting down and losing contact with the basic Soma and with our open-ended feeling of somatic experience. Actually, to tell the truth, we find ourselves losing

contact with reality. As we abide in the posture, impulse doesn't feel good; it comes off as needy, claustrophobic, and even suffocating. If we are sitting within our Soma, we have plenty of room to be with these feelings and explore them, coming back to our posture over and over and experiencing impulse within a much vaster environment. But even if we are just going about our day, as we become more sensitive to it through our practice, impulse often feels off. We are slowly becoming more conscious of impulse, its nefarious activity, and the subterranean influence it has been exerting on us all these years. We are disqualifying impulse from being the decider in our life. We now begin to discover the possibility of conscious choice emerging from within the larger field of our somatic awareness.

Conscious choice, in this context, is a strange and paradoxical concept. In a sense, the only real conscious choice available to us humans is not to go along with impulse; when we are able to avoid going with it and acting out, then we are left with the boundless field of what the Soma knows. At that point, what needs to happen is obvious; the Soma knows the totality in a way our conscious mind never can. So "conscious choice" in this case just means not resisting what is absolutely obvious and necessitated by the actual situation. Just this is what Trungpa Rinpoche called "choicelessness": that as you move along the path, there are actually no real choices or alternatives beyond going along with the actual reality known within your "choiceless awareness." Unless, of course, we elect to have an oedipal tantrum and put impulse back in control, which we all do from time to time. But this too is an important step on the path. I think that even in this case, we are just checking that old suit of clothes, hoping against hope that maybe it isn't too small and incredibly uncomfortable after all, constricting to the point of making us sick. But of course, it is.

The Dismantled Impulse and the Ego

Let's ask once more: If impulse is gradually dismantled, then what happens to the fourth and the fifth skandhas, the conceptually constructive process that provides us with a coherent identity? What happens to our ego? The fourth and fifth skandhas still operate, as mentioned earlier, but on a different basis. In fact, they are participants in a healthy and wholesome ego process.

To say briefly here (for the rest of this book will offer further reflections), through the process of Pure Awareness, several things happen to the fourth and

fifth skandhas and the ego or self-image they form. In the fourth skandha, when we abide within the Soma, we are still labeling things—for example, people: this is a woman, this is a man, this is a policeman, this is a drug dealer, this is my boss, this is my employee, this is my spouse, and so forth. As long as we are in a state of disconnection, we treat these kinds of labels and their mental associations as if they represent the real person, the ultimate truth of them. We behave toward people in terms of the labels we attach to them, and we don't see anything further.

But once impulse has been sufficiently exposed, detained, and then dethroned and we do not cut ourselves off from the Soma, it is almost as if we don't see the labels, at least as something solid and real. Of course we know that this person has this or that role in society and hence carries this or that label; but it is almost as if we look straight through the label to see the real person standing in front of us. We are able to discern, make out, decipher the literal reality of them, who they truly are. This actual person, whose actual reality now stands revealed, has nothing to do with any of the labels, with anything we can think or imagine. This person is, at this moment, “what there is to experience.” And at this point we meet the possibility of an authentic, conscious relationship with this other person.

Let's consider an example. Some of us have a perhaps unreasonable fear and even a dread of the modern hospital. We have heard all kinds of horror stories—disturbingly often from the doctors, nurses, technicians, and orderlies themselves—about the impersonality, the insensitivity, the dehumanization of patients, the mistakes, the ever-present possibility of getting sick from pathogens dwelling there; and perhaps we ourselves have had experiences that reinforce these ideas. Consequently, when we enter a hospital (particularly when our own health is at stake), we may be so overcome with our own preexisting memories and beliefs, and our fears and paranoias of worst-case scenarios for ourselves, that we don't really clearly see the many staff people and other patients we meet.

Let us say that, on the basis of newly appearing symptoms, our doctor has sent us into the hospital for tests, perhaps an MRI or a heart scan, so the stakes for us are high. We meet the orderlies and our technician, and at first perhaps all we care about are the possible outcomes for us; there is little sense of the orderly or technician beyond his or her function and significance for us. Every twinge of apprehension, fear, or pain sends us screaming into our thinking mind, and our thoughts are racing.

But then we catch our self and come into our Soma. We arrive at the extremely uncomfortable feelings that are occurring. The Soma is already beholding, for example, our technician. It already knows her in her actuality and totality. As we stay with our feeling, we are able to tap into what the Soma knows about her, and we receive it into our consciousness. And so we take the risk, we make the leap, and we surrender into the dark knowledge of our Soma.

At that moment, all thoughts of the hospital, all thoughts of that person as a technician, and of ourselves as a possibly very sick person, even of two people standing here—all fall away. And then there is just this woman, her feeling about herself, her life experience at that moment, her empathy and kindness, the unspeakable beingness of *her* just here, just her.

When we abide in the Soma, then, with each person we meet it is like that: there is a kind of freshness and curiosity about them, and you can see so much. Whatever label we might have been inclined to apply to them just isn't relevant. Whatever the business at hand may be, you look at this person in front of you, and somehow you see their unique human experience and history written on their face and in their body. What we discover is so vast and profound, of course any kind of labeling would be a travesty. It is compelling, and it feels ultimate in some incomprehensible way. The person may be older and so very tired and even hopeless, sad, and feeling trapped; or young, naïve, and full of hope, ambition, and expectation. You sense this person, whomever and whatever she is, and you want to know, "What is it like to be her, to inhabit her particular human life?" And you mysteriously find yourself within the life of experience of this other person, exactly how it is for her to be her. You connect with her, and maybe there is a spark of life and genuine response between the two of you. And you behold the enormous dignity and sacredness of *this* individual life.

This is an instance of "what there is to experience." In these moments, our relative, conditioned state of being, along with its limited perceptions and all of its labels and judgments, has fallen away. We are fully within the empty, open, limitless field of the Soma. And as we regard this person from within that unconditioned awareness, we see her exactly as she is far more completely than anything we could think or say. In the Vajrayana, it is said that seeing "what there is to experience" is "the radiance of emptiness," utterly beyond thought. Because experientially it does stand outside of the coordinates of time and space, it is truly a glimpse of eternity.

More and more you begin to "get it," and you realize that this life, as it is, has

some kind of beauty and ultimacy to it. In this moment of seeing and sensing and meeting, you haven't been thinking about yourself or the hospital or anything, really. What is here is new, unexpected, and fresh as a summer day, open and free, like finding yourself in a field of flowers beneath an endless sky. And you can see that this has never happened before and will never happen again. At this moment, reintroducing the conceptual labels and judgments would seem not only completely beside the point but like such a violation.

Of course, much of our contemporary humor is based on expressing the discrepancy between the actual reality and the labeling. Just now, I am remembering the Eddie Murphy film *Beverly Hills Cop*, in which we witness Murphy's character, the eponymous police officer, indulging in absolutely bizarre behavior and contravening every known standard of correct police conduct. This is all hilarious because of the implied contrast between Murphy's cop and the rather strong cultural expectations associated with the label of "cop": what he or she is and should be.

As we continue to work with impulse on the cushion and in our daily lives, constantly returning to the underlying feeling and being with it, we still label, categorize, and attach story lines to our experience, but not nearly as much and with far less conviction. The difference is that now, somewhere inside, we know they are fictions, and we are able to look right through them to the actual reality underneath. In consequence, we tend to hang on to them less, and there is a lively sense that they are tentative, porous, and likely to be proven wrong at any second. There is much room for humor, humility, and somewhat delightful self-deprecation here. This realization brings a kind of joy in living and doing the human thing of all this thinking, stranger and stranger though it may seem to us. Seeing that labeling and conceptualizing aren't as solid as we had thought leaves much room for movement, growth, pleasure, and play.

Getting into the Nitty-Gritty of the Practice

Practicing with Guidance and Without

In the beginning, we will have to make a lot of effort to bring our attention to the posture and to maintain it there. The audio guided meditations along with your study of this book should provide the training wheels you need to learn and assimilate the instructions. Once you have done that, then you are ready to practice on your own, without support. But there is no need to rush or push yourself to practice on your own. Please let yourself be guided and carried by my oral presentation for as long as you feel it is helpful. In fact, I know practitioners who have listened to a particular guided meditation daily for a month or two or much longer, and by the end of that time, it is so much part of them they hardly need to think about it. It is as if not only their mind but their body has integrated the full range of the practice. The guideline here, as always, is to follow your own somatic sense. At a certain point in listening to the guided practice, your body is going to notify you, “That’s enough.” Then it is time to move on and try the practice on your own.

At first, you may want to go through all four guided meditations and cover all seventeen points, maybe over a period of a few days, so you can experience the full terrain. After that, though, you might want to take one of the guided meditations—as you saw, each one leads you through only four or five of the seventeen steps—and stick with that for a while, until you feel it is yours. You could work with the first guided meditation for quite some time, then the second, and so on. But you could also move between them, as you feel called, and go in any order you want. As you do so, though, try to keep the overall geography of the entire practice in mind so that you don’t lose track of where you are in the

process. As the unfolding practice will make clear, every piece is part of every other, each feeding into the feeling of the whole, and we need to stay present to that fact.

When you listen to the audio guided meditations, you will notice that I am gradually building a sense of the entire posture. I will lead you through the five points of Guided Practice I. Then, when I guide you through the second, I will begin by going briefly through the first five points and then teach the next four points of Guided Practice II in detail. Similarly, when I lead you in Guided Practice III with its four steps, I will begin by going briefly through the nine steps you have already practiced in the first two guided sessions. And when I instruct you in the fourth and final guided practice with its four steps, I will begin by leading you briefly through the previous thirteen steps. By the time we have completed Guided Practice IV, you will be practicing the posture of Pure Awareness in its totality. Hopefully, with this approach, you will be able to begin sensing how the posture is working as one overall whole.

When you get to the point of being able to practice, without my guidance, you will find all kinds of new and unexpected doors opening for you. This is the place where your practice really begins to become fully your own. When you practice on your own, while I do suggest going through all seventeen steps in each practice session as I have been training you, you can weight the steps unequally. At this point, you may want to minimize some parts and focus especially on one or two aspects that may be particularly intriguing or in need of extra attention. You will also discover aspects of the practices, places of special opening, subtle details not mentioned in my guidance, or images that will be helpful to you. If you set aside my guidance too early, you won't learn and integrate the overall posture and its elements properly, and you will risk altering the basic forms and dropping off key elements without realizing it; and this can lead you quite astray. But when you are ready, practicing on your own will inaugurate a new and exciting stage on your journey of discovery.

Finding the Organic Unity of the Posture

When we first take up the practice of Pure Awareness and are trying to put together the aspects of the posture, they may seem like separate, discordant elements. If you do feel this way, there is no problem, nor are you doing anything wrong. If this is the case, we need simply to bring ourselves back to

whatever the posture feels like at this moment. Remember the earlier discussion of feeling-evaluation? We are feeling this way because this is what the Soma is offering us as the next stage on our journey. There is an important lesson here. In the practice, we always need to identify with our body, no matter what is going on, and not allow ourselves to judge or separate on the basis of what we assume or think should be happening.

At the same time, as we go along in our practice, our experience of the posture as a whole is going to evolve. At some point, we will feel the posture increasingly as a unified, organic process with an internal life of its own, a felt sense in our body and of our being within it. The straight back naturally leads to a rising head, which calls us to drop the chin, and then the ears want to travel backward, which further opens the space of the spine and enhances its rise; then we sense where we are restricted and not fully open, and so we make necessary adjustments to free the energy of the posture. You will also discover, as mentioned, somatic prompts and images that are unique to your own practice. Incorporate these as feels appropriate. In the end, it is one flow, one lifting, one brightening process of life. In the practice, when we drift off, this organic, flowing whole is increasingly what we are coming back to.

There is nothing solid in this experience of the Soma, just a field and a flow of energy, and this brings us closer to what our body—experienced nakedly and directly—actually is. We cannot put it into words, nor do we need to. We can't form a single thought about it, but this is the actual reality of our Soma.

Working with the Technique

The somatic practice of Pure Awareness that I have been teaching you is obviously high on technique. Most of the instructions focus on learning the various elements of the posture and then attending to them in the practice. At the same time, as we have seen, the postural instructions are not an end in themselves. Instead, they aim to create a container for something else: namely, the insight and experiential understanding that is really the ultimate aim of the practice. The postural instructions, in other words, aim to establish a crucible for unconditioned awareness.

I mention this because in our effort to establish a good container in the practice, even though I have been directing you toward awareness throughout, there still might be a tendency to focus too heavily and exclusively on the

technique itself. It is possible, without realizing it, to assume that getting the literal posture right is the same thing as getting the practice right. We might turn the literal posture into a reference point and forget that the purpose of the posture is to create an arena for attaining the nonreferential field of our actual Soma. In other words, rather than allowing the technique to open us into the limitless somatic awareness we are looking for, we could have a tendency to allow the technique to get in between us and that vast state.

Why might we do this? Sometimes in our practice, without realizing it, we become anxious that we are losing our ground, that the practice is opening us up into a space of uncertainty, unpredictability, and groundlessness. In fact, this kind of anxiety is the norm for meditators when they begin to work with a technique. When this happens, particularly if we don't realize what is going on, there is a natural tendency to think something is wrong, that we should not be feeling such things. And then, because there is some kind of perhaps unconscious assumption that the practice should be making us feel better, we redouble our efforts with the technique, hunkering down into it to ward off our discomfort or insecurity. At this point—again, without realizing it—we have reversed course and are trying to use our practice to make our ego feel better rather than to address the fundamental problem of ego itself.

While somatic meditation provides an effective set of tools to help us work through this major impasse, even here this challenge is always going to be there and needs to be addressed. So we had best be on the alert for this misuse of the technique, and we need to deal with it directly when we catch ourselves falling into it. To try to clarify further what is at stake here, I would like to say a little more about shamatha and vipashyana—or mindfulness and awareness—in somatic meditation.

When I speak about “the technique” of the instructions on posture, I am referring to the aspect of shamatha in the practice; when I talk of “the vast state” that is our goal, I am referring to vipashyana. I mentioned earlier that these are the two most fundamental aspects of meditation practice: mindfulness (*shamatha*, literally, “making the mind peaceful”) and awareness (*vipashyana*, literally, “extraordinary or exceptional seeing”). Let me review and extend what has already been said.

Mindfulness involves bringing your attention to a particular “object.” In conventional Buddhism, this is typically the breath at the verge of the nostrils. You make an effort, and sometimes it needs to be a considerable one, to hold

your attention on your object; and when your mind wanders, you bring it back to the breath. This process goes on and on until the volume of discursive thinking begins to diminish and the mind becomes more settled, spacious, and tranquil. The practice of mindfulness, in short, downregulates our consciousness, bringing it into a state of ease, stillness, and openness.

In our Pure Awareness practice, the object of shamatha or mindfulness is going to be a part or sector of our body—for example, the lower belly, the back line, the position of our head, the back of our head. When we put all of the aspects of the posture together, our object of mindfulness is just the entire body. Our object can also be the breath, though rather than being the breath at the tip of the nose, as in conventional meditation, here it will be the breath in the lower belly, or the breath along the rising spine, or the breath in a holistic sense as a subtle way of paying attention to the body as a whole in the integrated posture. As we have seen, in somatic meditation, it is basically the same process we find in conventional meditation of focusing on and attending to our object of mindfulness, then, when the mind wanders, returning our attention to the somatic object of our mindfulness again and again.

Awareness as defined in the somatic lineage is not the result of a deliberate and intentional practice in the way that shamatha is. In shamatha, when we bring our attention to a particular locale in our body, we arrive, we focus, we attend, and we wait for what the Soma will communicate to us. What the Soma is then able to convey to us is called “vipashyana.” It is the extraordinary seeing that occurs when we set aside, through shamatha, our own interpretations and are able to receive what is actually going on from the viewpoint of the Soma itself. The key point is that the shamatha of the technique is never more than a stepping-stone to vipashyana or awareness. When it is taken as an end in itself, then we are focusing too heavily; then the technique becomes a block to the further journey into awareness.

Let us look at the relationship of shamatha and vipashyana as an organic, unified, and freely flowing process. We come into our posture of Pure Awareness. When we drift off into thinking, we come back to the entire experiential field or presence, the felt sense of the totality. So we begin with the technique, which in this case consists of building the posture of Pure Awareness, abiding within it, and then identifying with it. Shamatha, up to a certain point, is grounding and pacifying; and that is essential as step 1.

But then, all of a sudden, the technique itself and the container of the posture

you have created are likely going to feel too small; they will feel restrictive and claustrophobic. Please notice there will be a moment when you may feel strongly that you want to let the effort go and just be. When you have really gone through the steps of the instructions and you have really shown up and assimilated them, then your own awareness will call for you to let go.

You could say that the container fails in favor of something far more vast and unknown. Let it fail. At that point, you release everything—all effort, all intention. You let go and just let your somatic awareness be however it is, without boundary or limit. This is the moment when we discover that our somatic experience is not located only within the envelope of our skin. In fact, shockingly, it is everywhere and also nowhere.

This shift can also happen in a more spontaneous way, without any intervention on your part, even that of letting go. Say, for example, you are working with the technique, you are following the postural instructions closely. But then, at a certain point, the totality hits you; what the totality is registers in nonconceptual awareness. This is vipashyana. It is as if you were in a dream of what you were thinking the totality was but did not know you were thinking that. When the totality hits, there is a subtle jolt. All of a sudden, there is a burst of energy waking you from what you were dreaming into perceiving what is actually there.

The totality is spontaneously revealed beyond anything we could possibly think or say. Words failing, we could use imagery—it is like a boundless sea with temperature, color, smell, shifting forms, emotional feeling sense, emotional tone. Or it is like a sky that is fundamentally open and clear and endless, but with diaphanous rainbows coming and going.

With that either slightly intentional or entirely spontaneous shift from our deliberate ego-based practice (shamatha, mindfulness) into the spontaneous expansiveness of somatic awareness, we find ourselves present to things, not as we were imagining them to be, but as they are. We have moved from something that may have been feeling a little stale, static, and solid into something fresh, flowing, vast, and ungraspable. We have moved from what we might call “intentional strategic consciousness” (ego) to “spontaneous beholding consciousness” (the awareness of the Soma itself).

And what happened to the technique? It might still be there, but as a more or less transparent vessel that is about this compelling other thing. Without thinking about it, we might remain in our posture as a felt sense, but this is now a

rainbow-like event within a relaxed, spontaneous, and quite beautiful—and infinite—awareness.

Going Deeper

Getting Down to It with Impulse

If we are relative newcomers to the somatic practice of Pure Awareness, we may find our mind constantly wandering away, such that we cannot be with the posture for more than a few seconds; we are continually having to bring ourselves back, over and over. Sometimes we may forget the posture completely for periods of time and drift off into some extended ego narrative—a complex fantasy, some drama, serious strategizing, or other line of thinking. When we notice this, though, without mental comment or judgment, we just arrive back in the posture. As mentioned earlier, no need for a second thought here.

Though our seeming inability to stay present to our posture may be frustrating, this should be no cause for discontent or discouragement. In fact, even as new practitioners, we are already beginning to address and dismantle our habitual tendency to separate from our experience and isolate into a disembodied state. Every time something erupts in our mind and threatens to take us over, capture our attention, and pull us away from the posture, that is the birth of impulse.

Each time our mind wanders, impulse is already gathering momentum toward lift-off velocity. The ego payoff that happens if we just let impulse run its course only deepens our habitual neurological rut, and we are more likely to go there in the future. As the Dalai Lama says, the more you feed desire and craving, the worse they get and the worse you end up feeling. But every time we interrupt this acceleration by coming back to the posture, we are undermining the neurological circuitry of impulse. When impulse is interrupted in midcourse and we are driving less and less in those neurological ruts, then going along with

impulse becomes less automatic, less attractive, and eventually less likely.

When we don't go along with a particular impulse—when the neurotic, emotional payoff is denied over and over through the practice—more and more we see that the absolute command quality of impulse is a complete and total fabrication. As we come back to the posture again and again, we see that when we do not indulge an impulse but boycott it, not only do we not die, but at a certain point—and sometimes surprisingly soon—the impulse itself seems to give up; it just dissolves, goes away. Then we enter into a much more open, spacious, and free state of being. It turns out that the dictatorial quality of that impulse was a complete illusion! And now we are in the freedom and openness of the Soma, present to “what there is to experience.”

As our practice continues, we become increasingly aware of the subtle dynamics of our disembodied tendencies. We may notice that every time we have a discursive thought, we lose the posture. Even with the flicker of a thought or a sense perception that momentarily catches our attention, we are no longer within the posture. It is really quite shocking. There is a subtle slump that may not be discernible from the outside but will be felt internally as a change in our somatic feeling, a sense of losing our identity with the openness, clarity, and spontaneous uplift along the back line of the spine. Our awareness suddenly becomes murky, even opaque. Abruptly, we are gone; we have just disembodied. We have lost contact with our Soma, our direct, unadorned, and unfiltered human experience.

By virtue of our training in the Pure Awareness technique, before we go too far into proliferating discursive thought, we have the opportunity to notice and return. In so doing, we are catching impulse very close to its birthplace; just by coming back to the posture, we are cutting off impulse near its root and further disempowering and dismantling our habitual reactivity. Impulse is beginning to lose its hold over us, our behavior, and our life.

The more we come into contact with the Soma, what Zen calls “our true self” or “our true life,” the more sensitive we become to our own continuing tendency to disembody. The contrast between the openness and the freedom of the Soma and the pettiness and claustrophobia of ego becomes more and more vivid; our disembodied state begins to feel increasingly unacceptable and unbearable. In our practice, this can even bring us to a point of desperation. Painful though this may be, it is an important development, because it inspires us to keep practicing and to keep opening to what is occurring. Truly, we see beyond a shadow of a

doubt that surrender to deeper embodiment, to the mystery of our own body and life, is the only way forward, and there is no way back.

Our evolving experience repeatedly confirms the Buddhist explanation of the critical role impulse plays in the birthing of our small self, our ego, from moment to moment. We are beginning to see for ourselves, clearly and precisely, just how the five skandhas operate and that by cutting the central root of impulse, we are cutting off the energy that sustains the ego. Then the great tree of “me” begins to sway and crack, to lean dangerously; and we can see it is only a matter of time until it topples over into the oblivion it arose from in the first place.

This is why simply coming back to the Pure Awareness posture and to its openness and spaciousness, over and over, is the perfect and supreme practice on the road to full embodiment, full awakening. In simply making the effort to come back, regardless of everything else, we are making the journey exactly as we need to; we are traveling along the road toward complete somatic realization. This is how we build, step by step, what is called “the body of enlightenment.”

Pure Awareness and Everyday Distraction

Generally, when we do anything in life, we have multiple conversations going on in our heads. We are observing what we are doing, we have hope and fear about its outcome, we may be judging and evaluating as we go, we may be wondering how others are taking this, we may be projecting into the future, perhaps we are even simultaneously thinking about other things. In short, we are just not there; we are barely present to what we are doing, if at all.

This is experienced as a kind of semidistracted state that we are in nearly all of the time. The tendency to be distracted and more or less elsewhere is often felt most strongly when we are engaged in an activity during which we actually *do* very much want to be present, such as standing before exceptional natural beauty, participating in creative work, communing with someone we care deeply about. While we want to be completely, fully present, we realize we can’t do it.

The practice of Pure Awareness shows us how to approach our everyday life distraction. It is the very same instruction as when, in sitting practice, we begin to mentally wander: we bring our attention back to our Soma, attend to our posture, identify with it, and let go of everything else. We can apply this same technique to the encounters and tasks of our ordinary life. When we are doing

something and notice that our attention is wandering or incomplete, we can bring ourselves back to the person, the situation, or the task at hand. Knowing what it feels like to identify fully with our Soma, whenever we let go of the distraction and disconnection of discursive wandering, we can seek the same presence and identification, the same level of surrender, no matter what situation we are relating to in our life off the cushion.

Everyday Life

We can see, then, that the somatic practice of Pure Awareness is hardly an escape from, nor a substitute for, our ordinary embodied human life. Rather, its purpose is to enable us to choose, to experience, and to fully live our concrete existence—the unfathomable givenness of our incarnation. This point becomes clearer when we look at the relationship of our practice to our daily life.

When we wake up in the morning, we may find ourselves feeling slightly nauseous, with a kind of hangover from the night—what Trungpa Rinpoche called “early morning depression.” Our mind is scattered, with random feelings and thoughts coming and going; our experience may seem flat, aimless, tepid. There is no sense of cohesion, direction, or clarity. Perhaps most tellingly, there is no openness or interior space, and this leaves us feeling slightly ill and vaguely claustrophobic. There is possibly an undercurrent of subtle anxiety or nameless fear, a feeling of being weighed down and slightly oppressed, as if our state of being were clogged with sludge and we can’t seem to free ourselves from it.

This distressing state of being may be tied up in our mind with events or people in our life, perhaps things that occurred the previous day or evening, some unresolved relationship, some long-ago person or event that still eats away at us, with no end in sight. It is natural to think that it is external persons, situations, or events that are causing our malaise and to ruminate on how we might change those external factors in order to feel better. Sometimes we think of actually doing something about it; other times we try to make up a new and more pleasing internal story in relation to it; yet other times we may attempt to push it out of consciousness and focus on our practice.

Be this as it may, none of these approaches quite works, and we feel apprehensive about the day ahead. How can we approach our day feeling so clogged and weighed down? Right now, we sense our bad feeling as a heavy pall

over everything. What if our bad feeling comes out in how we move about our day? Our partner will surely notice. This hangover quality can appear quite frequently in our life and can make it difficult to approach our day with any genuine freshness, curiosity, or openness—with “beginner’s mind,” as Suzuki Roshi says. And when experienced day after day, this sometimes subtle oppression makes it nigh impossible to turn toward our life with any appetite at all, let alone be fully present to it. No doubt about it, this *is* a real malaise, however common it may be and however much most of us accept it as just how things are. As we are feeling these things, likely our mind is churning about, looking for some escape. But we do find ourselves, on this particular morning, sick of our life and sick toward it, and it really doesn’t matter whether we choose to try to ignore it, to hate it, or to manipulate it in some other direction. Breakfast may distract us, but it doesn’t really resolve the problem.

In this context, our practice is truly our most precious remedy. Because of the experience of our previous meditation sessions, we strongly suspect that whatever compromised and “ill” state of mind we may be in, it is probably *not* the way things ultimately are. We sense from our memories of past experience that this like any other mind state of ours is fragile, porous, and shaky.

So we sit down with this state of mind, come into our body, and then exit; we come back, over and over; and we wait to see what happens. Early in our practice life, we may actually believe that nothing is going to happen, but we sit there anyway. Later in our journey, we might see that our meditation does its magic sometimes, but we still can’t quite shake our belief in the immutability of this seemingly soiled and solid mind state. Yet part of us knows better, so we meditate anyway. As our practice matures, we develop a sense of bemused perplexity at how impenetrable our state of mind can sometimes *seem* to be. Whether it is wretched and depressed or inflated and manic, we can marvel at how utterly real and unchangeable it may appear, but this in itself seems slightly ridiculous; and over time we develop a lively curiosity about what is going to happen to it in the course of a practice session.

As we have seen, there is some mysterious alchemy that happens when we simply carry out the somatic practice and wait. By the end things have shifted—and we never cease to be shocked by it and a little thrilled. We feel the cool breeze of reality wafting through; we feel somehow refreshed, open, interested, anticipatory of our day. We are in touch again with the deeper resources in ourselves that allow us to approach the challenges of today with some real relish and confidence. The practice becomes a powerful tonic for the little diseases of

our ordinary life. As Buddhism says, it is the best medicine you ever had.

After a certain period of time, as our practice ripens and we mature, a faith develops in us toward the practice, a further deepening of the devotion to our journey and the trust in the efficacy of meditation that has gotten us this far. This faith appears not to be essentially a conceptual belief, but feels more deeply rooted in our Soma and in our unconscious. It manifests itself as a kind of cheerfulness and even a physical joy that runs like an underground river beneath whatever is happening for us on the more obvious and surface level of our immediate consciousness.

One may be in the midst of some difficult situation or brewing conflict with someone; one may be physically ill or plagued with apprehension about one's future. At the same exact time, running beneath all these programs, so to speak, is this deeper undercurrent of optimism, well-being, and fundamental happiness that we have such a life, with all the ups and downs—that it is so very workable because of the practice.

We find that in the midst of our inevitably and inherently ambiguous, conflicted, insecure, uncertain human life, we actually feel joy in all of it, in simply being, whatever form that may take. The alchemy, the transmutation, is so available, reliable, and real. This underlying joy is not in spite of our conditioned life but, strangely, because of it. For we discover, over and over, that it is only within the experiences of our conditionality and mortality that reality meets us and, in its infinitely mysterious ways, ushers us into freedom.

Obstacles and Antidotes

AS YOU BECOME MORE ESTABLISHED in your meditation practice, you'll likely notice a few common issues and obstacles reoccurring with some regularity. Let's take a look at some of these and consider ways to address them.

When a Nagging Obstacle Won't Let Go

As we have seen, through our posture of Pure Awareness, we are greatly enhancing and refining our ability to be present and also to sustain this presence in an increasingly continuous way. Working with impulse, we directly address our tendency to exit into thinking. We train ourselves to remain within our Soma.

However, at the same time, at any point some highly charged content may suddenly erupt forth, pulling us forcefully and irresistibly out of our practice, sending us off into some disembodied, mangled mental state. Try as we may, simply setting aside the troublesome content and attempting to return fully to our practice doesn't work. What is in question here is, obviously, a particularly strong affect, the upadana skandha of feeling-evaluation in an especially potent and tenacious form. Right now, we need to realize that it is the Soma itself that is notifying us that something different is required.

Part of us would like to let go of this nagging thing and align back with our Soma. Part of us will be tempted to tussle with our problem and fight against it. But rather than continuing to try to force ourselves to come back into our body and distance ourselves from our "problem," now we need to turn our body toward this troubling content and open to it.

It is true that by now we have developed a strong ability to focus our attention.

When thinking threatens to pull us out, we may not want to see what's happening and may try strongly to return to the task at hand. We may be tempted to employ the very powerful tools and techniques we have developed to try to minimize what is coming up and to dig deeper into the darkness and peace of the Soma. Ironically, because of all of our practice, we have the increased capacity to override the Soma.

But we mustn't. We need to let our practice be derailed right now. We need to respect what our Soma is offering. And we need to be honest with ourselves and accept what's happening. Initially, without really being aware of it, perhaps we do try to push through. If we do, we may possibly end up in a somatic space that seems, at least at first glance, to be relatively peaceful. But if we hang out with it a little while, we will likely notice something important: while we may have succeeded in pacifying the more obvious thinking going on around the problem and in getting rid of the more blatant potency of the affect, something doesn't feel right. The awareness that is there may feel a bit dry, arid, and lifeless, or dark, cloudy, and unsatisfying. Even more, we may feel something nagging at us, a feeling that something isn't resolved. The space isn't really completely open.

We have to be quite sensitive to notice this, but through all the work we have done up to this point we have developed a much greater somatic sensitivity. Our task now is to acknowledge what is happening and let go of our current idea of what we are supposed to be doing. *We mustn't let what we think about our practice get in between us and our actual practice.*

Right now, we need to commit to the Soma's message and allow our problem to reside right at the center of our somatic awareness. We need to be in our body and be fully identified with it. This is, of course, the instruction I have been offering. Unmask impulse, boycott it, and let it go; then be with the feeling-evaluation that is underneath; stay with that affect, however threatening or painful it is; and let it make its journey and resolve itself, however long it takes.

But it is one thing to have a conceptual understanding of the process and quite another to find some highly troublesome "something" to be menacing our practice and disrupting it. It is the most difficult thing in the world to see our practice—whatever we understand that to be at this moment—be blown up by something, whether it's a lawn mower or leaf blower outside our window or some ghost that has suddenly come out of the closet of our unconscious.

As we sit on our cushion, we are not talking about immersing ourselves in the

affect, getting lost in it, becoming overwhelmed or flooded by it. We are also not talking about sitting there thinking about it. Rather, at this moment, we need to rest in our own somatic openness and admit the disquietude, the angst, the nausea, whatever it may be, as an honored guest.

In this way, we are sitting with the problem right in front of us, right with us, feeling it with our full somatic capacity. Particularly when we are feeling really overwhelmed, this process might be helped by some visualization. Imagine the problematic person right in front of you, facing you; or perhaps an image that captures the difficult feeling of the situation. Find the distance that feels right, close enough so you are right with it but not so close that you get lost in it. And continue the practice with the problem sitting in front of you, practicing with you, so to speak, as you sit.

Just to emphasize: this needs to be entirely somatic. More than this, we need to realize that the problem is not separate from our body. In practicing in this way, we need to be with the visualization of the person or the situation or be with the emotion or the subtle feeling in exactly the same way as we are with whatever else may be going on in our body. For, in truth, what at first may seem external *is* an aspect of our body. In a literal sense, we are making our body bigger so that it includes the problem as part of itself. To repeat: it is entirely somatic, a dimension of our now somewhat larger body. So the shadow, the energy, the discordance, the nauseating thing is now included as an event happening *within our body*. As I have already suggested, it is truly a part of ourself, not really outside at all. We continue to sit in the way we have been training, attending to this now more inclusive Soma of ours.

As I have been saying, if we are willing to be patient and truly hang out in the practice for as long as it takes, at a certain point something changes. There is a kind of shift, as if a strong dream we have been caught in has suddenly shattered or a dam that has been holding us back has broken. The feel of this transformation could be very subtle. It is as if suddenly we find ourselves awake, relaxed, present, and free. It's amazing: our darkness felt as if it were going to last forever, and now, eureka, it is nowhere in sight. What happened?

We see how it was with our problem; the assumption that it was outside of us was what kept us so caught. We see how this prevented us from seeing the actual problematic person or situation in and of itself; now that we do, everything is not only okay with us but really as it should be: open, spacious, and free. The problematic situation or person is now revealed, in humor and delight, to be a

joyful participant in the dance of our own life. All of a sudden, we experience ourselves free of our problem; it is truly resolved in a deep way. Our world is abruptly fresh and beautiful and so alive, and our journey continues.

Most importantly, we see that it is not that “we” have in any way worked through or solved the problem on our own, through our own efforts. Quite the opposite: we see now that it was only when we gave up the effort to free ourselves by our own lights, let go of our obsessions and ruminations on the problem, and attended to the body—when we turned the problem over to the Soma—that the body itself was able to find the resolution and offer it back to us. This is an insight that will have profound importance through our entire path. We now have concrete evidence of the way in which the Soma is the protector and guide on our journey. We also understand that our own unconditional trust in the Soma is the only way we are going to make a sure and certain spiritual journey throughout this wild and unknown life of ours.

Resistance: When We Can't Get to Our Practice

Another all-too-common obstacle for both new and longtime meditators is discouragement and even losing confidence in the practice altogether. I'd like to say a little about this pervasive issue here, and we'll look at other forms of resistance to practice in part 5.

At the moment we sit down to meditate, our current shrunken, unpleasant state of mind may seem to be all there is and all there ever could be. It appears to be just how things are, very real and solid. We may try to manipulate our thoughts to feel better; however, by now we are just too self-aware and too sensitive to buy it, and when we try this tack we just feel worse. We may think, “Wow, I'm finding myself in a pretty crummy space here.”

Uncomfortable as our state of mind may be, there seems to be no way out, because at this moment we can't even imagine that there is an alternative, that any “outside” even exists. We are caught within the circular, solipsistic logic of our thinking mind. Neuroscience explains that when we get trapped within the endlessly repeating loops and circuitry of our prefrontal cerebral cortex like this, we tend to mistake our thoughts for reality and are oblivious to any other way of knowing or seeing or even to the notion that there is any other reality to be known. Research shows that even in the face of blatant somatic evidence to the contrary, we often habitually refuse to see or acknowledge it. This is the height

of self-deception, yet it is the human default when our thinking mind is disconnected from our body and our somatic experience.

The apparent, all-too-convincing reality of what the conceptualizing mind thinks presents real challenges to the meditator. When we are caught within our thinking mind, we don't quite see the point of all this meditation. At the same time, ego's default mode—trying to run faster and faster and pushing even harder to control everything right now—seems to us to be the only reliable way to resolve our gnawing existential discomfort and pain. At this point, we are really trapped in our ruminating and have lost the ability to see through it. Especially if we are new to meditation, the logic of our thoughts can be so compelling and overwhelming that we begin to distrust the practice and its whole approach. This is the moment when, in my experience, the new meditator is most likely to quit, running off to find something better—drugs, a new therapist, exciting travel, a new relationship, a new teacher, anything but this.

If we have been practicing meditation for a while, we are still vulnerable to this mental contempt for nonconceptual reality. In this case, abandoning the meditative journey rarely happens via some dramatic decision. Rather, say on Tuesday we have a lot to do, and when the time comes to meditate, it just seems like we should be doing other things, and so we skip our practice. We say to ourselves, “I will certainly get back to my practice tomorrow.” Then, on Wednesday, again we have a busy day ahead, and so again we skip our practice. Thursday we may give it a try but feel stale; so we feel, “What's the point?” Friday and Saturday, we just can't get to it. Then on Sunday, our family is going away for a few days, and we think, with some relief, “Obviously I can't do anything then.”

In this way, we are building a pattern of avoiding our practice, meanwhile justifying and rationalizing it to ourselves. We are building a case against meditation, bit by bit. We are believing the voice in our head telling us that meditation is possibly a big waste of time or can at least be deferred—we can always get to it at some point, there is plenty of time—and that practically anything else is more important, meaning more likely to provide the emotional payoff that our impulsive, ravenous nature is always looking for. We have such a tendency, especially when we are feeling uncomfortable or distressed, to go for that one more piece of cake, an extra half hour with the paper, one more hour of work, one more puff on the joint, one more gulp of alcohol, one more Internet purchase.

In my experience, many people, when first exposed to the practice of meditation, are deeply moved and inspired, and they see quite clearly the possibilities it offers. But after an initial flush of enthusiasm accompanied by a seemingly strong commitment and energetic practice, all too soon there is a tendency to give up. Almost always they abandon their practice because they take the naysaying voices of their thinking mind as real. They can't see—or maybe they don't want to see—the self-serving, random, in fact chaotic nature of the thoughts running through their mind, nor that the picture being presented is nothing more than a big, self-justifying delusion.

Commitment, Discipline, and Devotion

So each day, when it is time to practice, we look at our cushion with our disconnected, slightly tormented, fragmented state of mind, and we think, “No—no way. I am not going to, I can't sit down.” Let's admit it. This happens to all of us, no matter how new or how experienced we may be. But this is where commitment, discipline, and devotion to our own deeper self are so important and, in fact, can save our life: we sit down anyway and begin our session.

In our world, this kind of commitment, discipline, and devotion are rarely seen in a positive light. To state a truism, the economies of modern societies are increasingly driven by mindless, impulse-motivated consumption; and this is undergirded and made possible by a pernicious ideology that lives and thrives within the cut-off cerebral consciousness of the modern person. This is the belief that we should never have to feel dissatisfaction, discomfort, or pain and that we can consume a universe of things out there that will instantly relieve our “problem.” Just in case I ever think that I am above it, all I have to do is take a very close look at how I move through my day. This is an antidote I recommend to everybody.

From the somatic standpoint, there are two things wrong with this pernicious ideology. First, it doesn't work. There isn't any way, short of killing yourself, to remove the fundamental angst, dissatisfaction, and distress that go with being human. The most you can hope for is to deaden or distract yourself for a while, but then you are back where you started or worse. So the promise that consuming is going to work is quite fallacious. And, unfortunately, this particular delusion—this big lie—is powerful, coherent, convincing; some of the smartest people on the planet are continually finding new and inventive ways of

arguing for it—and it is deadly.

The second problem with this ideology is that it presupposes a fundamental view about human life that is incorrect. I can put this simply because it is a premise of this book: fundamental and lasting human happiness cannot be gained through the path of consumption and gratification. It is just not how we, as humans, are set up. If we would like to feel happy, fulfilled, and at peace with ourselves, we need to connect with our own state of being, our own body, our own human experience, and our incarnation in its totality. Again, continually scrambling around to feed our sense of lack with the poisonous fruit of compulsive consumerism just isn't going to work.

Through our somatic practice, we gradually come to see that we are actually quite addicted to the belief that consuming is a viable route for us, and we begin to see that our actual practice is putting things in our mouth, literally or figuratively, every time we feel anxious. At the same time that our self-awareness is developing beautifully, through the practice we are touching another part of ourself that has been, right from the start, what we have actually been looking for all along: something that is truly us, that helps us feel at home with ourself and our life, and that is experienced as open, fulfilling, peaceful, and deeply contented.

At that point, as members of a world built around consumption we can look back at our somatic practice and appreciate the importance of commitment, discipline, and devotion. These may be quite unfamiliar capacities at first, not well developed in us, but that isn't necessarily a problem. We can now see, on the basis of our own experience, that we are going to need them; they are going to be essential in order for us to gain what we long for. And so we get to work, beginning to shed the impulse-driven, toxic, addictive patterns of compulsive consuming and the erroneous belief in consumption that supports them. This all occurs simply in and through the somatic practice of Pure Awareness.

Once we have some understanding of the importance of commitment, discipline, and devotion, we can begin to work with our resistance in a creative way. So now we are gaining some very helpful knowledge of the seemingly solid cerebral state of mind. Even when we are quite taken over, it is not lost on us what typically happens when we sit down to meditate with it: because of past experience, we know that this seeming solid reality is, in fact, quite fragile. In the crucible of the practice, this mentally constructed reality is not going to be able to maintain itself.

Our thinking mind may continue to tell us—in fact, typically *does* keeping telling us—that there isn’t anything else but its own version of reality and that meditating is pointless, a terrible waste of time. “Meditation is not feeding me! It is not gratifying me!”—the pernicious ideology. But because of our commitment and our past experience, we have some faith in the process, and so we sit down anyway to do a session. You could say we are exhibiting *blind* faith, because right now we *are* blind—the self-involved, solipsistic logic of our thinking mind is, at least for the moment, utterly convincing—and yet we are working against it. As I said, we develop a sense of irony, curiosity, and even humor: “Wow, this seems so *real*. Let’s see what happens if I meditate with it.”

What Happens Next?

At this point, the practice of Pure Awareness instructions on posture, breathing, and not moving become critical. These instructions take us completely out of the game of trying to make things better for ourselves or manipulate our experience in any way. When our mind is lost, confused, and in pieces, we are always swimming around, struggling to try to find some ground and some relief. Without the rigorous techniques for embodiment, we would simply bring that fruitless struggle into our meditation practice. However, when the whole direction of our practice is to move toward alignment and identification with the posture and away from our discursive, evaluative thinking, when we are simply present to the sensations of our body and breathing, and when we don’t move, then the thinking mind gradually loses its grip on us.

But then what? As John Daido Looi Roshi said, “Then nothing.” Then we just wait. We are waiting and waiting and waiting. We are prepared to wait forever, if need be. We have that attitude. In some sense, this kind of aimless, endless waiting is *it*. What’s the problem? Are you feeling impatient? Include the impatience as an event within your body, not about anything external. Sleepy, anxious, looking forward, depressed, excited? Just make your bodily awareness bigger to include within it whatever is going on and be with it fully. And wait. Every time we bring some nagging doubt or potential distraction back into our Soma, we wind up back at our waiting. As is said every day in Zen, “Set aside all external involvements and let the ten thousand things be.” And what happens when we do that? What is left? Just the waiting.

This waiting, however, is not ordinary waiting. Ordinary waiting has a sense

that we are waiting *for* something; there is some lack or deficiency or absence and we are waiting for that to be filled. The waiting I am talking about is entirely different. It is waiting in the sense of eternal abiding. It is experienced as a state of absolute presence, containing everything, with nothing missing. It is abundant being, with a feeling of fullness, plenitude, all-inclusiveness, and potency. Letting every temptation and diversionary possibility go, we “reside in the circle of brightness”;¹ and we wait because there is, at this moment, nothing that could be more compelling, nothing more perfect or complete that is able to pull us out. In fact, all of a sudden waiting is not waiting anymore, because there is nothing to wait for—it is all right here. Waiting in this sense is *being* in the fullest possible sense. This is it; this is nothing other than the primordial awareness of the natural state. It is the end, the fulfillment. And yet, as we have seen, it is also a beginning—the beginning of a life that is governed by eternal abiding. And what that is, for all of us, always remains to be seen.

In that way, it is no longer “I” who is waiting; by the gift of the practice, it begins to feel as if it is the body that is residing in its fullness and perfection. It just is, and is, and is, moment after moment. At that point, the body’s waiting includes everything, without judgment or expectation. That is what in Chan is called “a single thought for ten thousand years.” That is simply the Soma’s way.

What happens when we wait in this way is that the process of the Soma is able to take over. You sit there, and you feel that something is happening, but you don’t know what it is or where it is going; you don’t even know whether what’s happening is real or not. In any case, those are all thinking-mind problems. From the Soma’s point of view, those kinds of concerns are not relevant; in fact, they inhibit the unfolding somatic process. But something does seem to be moving, evolving, developing. At a certain point, our mind begins to feel more coherent. Without our ego involvement, our thoughts seem less random; they are felt to be functioning in more connected and meaningful patterns. A background of peace becomes more noticeable and even tangible. Insights come up about our day or things we have been ruminating on or people in our life, but the “me” of ego is not involved. We see the resolutions that are being offered that are arriving from somewhere else, down below—and they are apt and perfect to the situation.

Sometimes there is that sudden shift, and a very big stillness opens up. This may develop into an experience of the limitless awareness behind and beneath it all. By the time we finish our practice sessions, we realize what a different place we are in. We feel depth, connection, and grounding as we move along in our

day. Anxiety, nausea, and dread have perhaps been replaced by curiosity, warmth, and inspiration toward even the most mundane activities ahead of us. It is actually very strange. And the “me” of ego did nothing to make this happen. All we did was surrender to the body through the Pure Awareness postural technique, and this took our ego mind off-line and entrusted our life to the much vaster reality of our Soma, our incarnate being in the world.

Along the way, we may have glimpses of a momentary identification with the Soma—when we are fully within the Soma with nothing left over, no thinking, no ego process, no exiting. In such a glimpse, there is no longer a separate mind over here looking at a separate body over there. There is just our Soma, not as *a* reality, but as *the* nondual reality itself, with no outside and no inside; it is not even aware *of* itself but is self-aware—the Soma as awareness itself. The term “self-aware” comes from the Mahamudra tradition and is also sometimes called “one without a second.” Nobody is watching or observing in such a moment, but somehow it is known.

This is what Soto Zen founder Eihei Dogen refers to when he talks about body and mind dropping away. The conventional dualistic mind as knower and the body as an object of knowledge simply fall away and disappear into the void. At this moment, we don’t just touch our buddha nature, we are at one with it; there is no separation. This is why Suzuki Roshi stated that when we sit in the practice of Pure Awareness, we *are* buddha. This is not a metaphorical statement; it is quite literal. These glimpses are important because they show us that what we are doing, all the sweat and grit that are required, really *are* leading us somewhere—somewhere that is both altogether real and quite amazing, beyond anything we can imagine, even if it is simply a return to the fundamental person we have always been.

Bringing Trauma into the Journey

Trauma as a Universal Human Event

Increasingly in modern culture, trauma and its debilitating effects are regarded as a curse, pure and simple. People who identify as having been traumatized often feel they have been dealt a bad hand (an idea reinforced by the general culture) and that they will never have a free and fulfilling human life. For many, trauma can turn into an identity that trumps everything else, a damning reference point that often feels written in stone. I have felt that way myself at certain periods of my life, and I fully understand and appreciate how deep the darkness can be for someone suffering from the effects of trauma.

At the same time, this somatic Vajrayana lineage that I was trained in, while not denying the depth and agony of trauma, takes a slightly different point of view. In this lineage, and particularly in the somatic practice of Pure Awareness, the effects of trauma are seen as an invitation, on the part of the Soma, to an immense spiritual opportunity—one that in this case aims to get our attention by extreme means. In brief, the arising of trauma is the Soma's way of notifying us of spiritual work that needs to be done and that it *can* be done, if we approach it in the right way.

In this chapter, I want to briefly consider the role of trauma in our practice life and how we may work with it in the most creative way. I am bringing this up because, as you may already have suspected, *it is going to come up of its own accord* when we relate with the body and practice the posture of Pure Awareness. There is no avoiding it.

To clarify, when I speak of trauma, I am referring to past experiences—from birth up to the present—that were so painful at the time of their occurrence, we

have blocked them out of awareness in order to survive. Without ever really experiencing them fully—sometimes without any conscious experience at all—we have repressed them into the unconscious. And we have set up a battery of unconscious defense mechanisms so that we don't ever have to feel the terrible feelings that might potentially arise. The unconscious part is important: buried in us, out of sight, are unconscious emotional assumptions and beliefs about what reality is that are biased and twisted. But, while they continue to impact everything we see and think about and do, while they continue to greatly limit our experience and impede our life, because they are unconscious, we cannot get at them. We think that this is just how things are.

As I have been saying, when experience arises in the body, its natural life cycle includes wanting to make itself known to our conscious mind. It needs to travel upward into our conscious awareness so we can learn from it, update our mental files, reform our views and emotional assumptions, and consider appropriate action. This, in the hypothetical healthy state, is how humans were meant to work. But in trauma, this process doesn't happen. Rather, the traumas in question remain trapped in a no-man's-land beneath our conscious awareness, in the body, in the unconscious. Significantly, until these are consciously surfaced and resolved, they don't go away, ever. They abide there, waiting to complete their cycle, sometimes over an entire lifetime. In my observation, many traumas are finally experienced and resolved in the last months, or weeks, or days of a person's life. Life is *going* to fulfill itself, even if it takes dying to do it.

Some of us have been subjected to such extreme and threatening experiences that their effects can paralyze us and shut down our natural life process, leaving us unable to function. The traumas that others of us suffer come and go, creating some dysfunction but not completely incapacitating us. However, the important point is this: trauma at one level or another is part and parcel of being human. None of us escapes.

In fact, the ego itself is a trauma response. In other words, in a process I described in a prior section of this book, the way the ego typically works is to withdraw from the fullness of experience because it is too threatening and, using impulse as an exit strategy, reduces naked and raw experience to a conceptual facsimile. This withdrawal and repression of most of what we experience into the unconscious, which is the ego's habitual mode of operation, is what I mean by saying, "The ego itself is a trauma response."

In fact, I suspect that our conscious personalities are the sum total of all the

traumas—all the unacceptable experiences we’ve been through and what we have done about them—over the course of our life. If you want to know the expressions of our traumas, just look at the five skandhas and especially at skandhas 2 and 3, feeling-evaluation and impulse. The skandhas are our very sophisticated human way of dealing with occurrences that seem unendurable—in other words, shockingly, pretty much everything we experience.

In the somatic practice of Pure Awareness, we are engaged in a process of making room for feeling-evaluation in its fullest sense as known by the body—and this is what traumatic feelings are, feeling-evaluation in its most extreme, excruciating form. We do this by setting aside our thinking mind and resisting the quick fix offered by impulse. Then we are face-to-face with all those feelings we never wanted to feel and up to now had found ways to avoid. Now, through the somatic work, we are able to be with the sometimes terribly painful feelings, stay with them, and allow them to resolve themselves. This is, in effect, the process of resolving our traumas.

As understood in this somatic lineage, if we don’t work on our traumas and gradually try to resolve them, there isn’t going to be much of a spiritual journey. Repressing unwanted feelings into the unconscious and not allowing them to surface requires a tremendous amount of energy on the part of our conscious mind. When we are engaged in this process, any awareness we may have, even as meditators, is going to be ego based, small, restricted, and self-serving. Awareness is fatally compromised, and we have no raw feeling, no direct experience, to work with, so there can be little further journey in the authentic sense.

Only by directly addressing the feeling life of our body can we resolve the neurotic patterns of feeling-evaluation and find out what really is there behind them for us to experience. Work with the body in this way, then, not only opens up the limitless, immaculate awareness, the groundless ground of our being, but it also lays bare “what there is to experience,” which is the universe in all of its immeasurable, chaotic, literally mind-blowing, magical life.

The situation is often very different if we are practicing a disembodied, top-down, left-brain style of meditation. In this case, often our practice becomes a way of distancing ourselves from our body, our feelings, and the relative experience of our life. Our practice becomes a way to wall off and deny everything seamy, unsavory, and squalid, in Trungpa Rinpoche’s rendition—the smelly, dirty, raw, and rugged quality of actual life. And then, again, no journey.

In the present context, the technique of disembodied meditation becomes a strategy by which to avoid relating with all the large and small traumas, to keep them at bay, locked away in the unconscious. Disembodied meditation, in fact, can strengthen the conscious mind in a bad way, creating a stronger, more impenetrable boundary between it and the unconscious, between ourself and what needs to happen for our journey to move forward.

By contrast, the bottom-up style of somatic meditation softens the boundary between the left-brain, conscious mind and the unconscious world of the Soma. The boundary becomes more porous, over time allowing us to become aware of all the information from our life experiences that seek resolution and, at the same time, opening up our experience of our deepest self and the sacred world we live in.

What If I Feel Unsafe?

At this point, we may have a question. We may identify as someone who has experienced serious trauma in our life and right now is living with its debilitating effects. We may wonder whether the somatic, postural practice that is being taught here is appropriate for us or even safe. If working with the body opens up the experience of previously unacceptable feeling for all of us, feeling associated with trauma, should I really be doing it?

The way to figure this out is, in the end, to listen to your body. If you have a therapist, spiritual advisor, or other trusted guide to help you, so much the better. As I have already said, any time you are working with your body in the posture of Pure Awareness, if you begin to feel unsafe, just back off the practice. The most important thing is to trust your body. It will notify you clearly and reliably if something isn't right for you, and it is critical to listen and not try to override its signals and push through.

Generally, if people have no sensation of their body at all or feel unsafe even thinking about paying attention to their body, that is a sign that they should do other, more gradual somatic work before attempting somatic meditation. In such cases, seeking the help of a good, somatic trauma specialist would seem indicated. If you do work with a somatic trauma therapist, he or she will be leading you in the very same direction that I am, except the process will be more gradual and will be modulated according to your individual situation and journey.

In the same way, if you are engaging in the practice and find yourself approaching some aspect of the posture that just doesn't feel right, don't do it. Work with the aspects that you feel comfortable with and only do as much of them as seems appropriate. There is no rush. Your body will let you know when it is time to move forward.

The Chocolate Cake

There will be times when we find ourselves really derailed in our practice, not just in our meditation session but in our practice overall. There are two common ways in which we can find ourselves thrown off track while practicing. The first is that we feel stuck: static, rigid, and dead; the second is that we feel inundated and overwhelmed by strong feelings that are coming up. In either case, it is likely that we are in the grip of some trauma, some unconscious ideas and assumptions that are calling for consciousness. Although it could feel somewhat like our normal state of affairs—"I more or less always feel frozen" or "I quite often feel overwhelmed and flooded"—it is likely that we have been activated and are in the grip of some unseen reactivity. Perhaps we surmise this, but we can't quite see what the issue might be or how it is hanging us up.

Let's consider the first case, that of feeling static, rigid, and dead. We may feel this in our practice day after day, week after week. We just feel really immobilized in space. Our practice may seem rather immovable and impenetrable, and we may catch ourselves trying to force our way through. Maybe we seem to be hitting the same wall over and over. This is definitely *not* the time to try harder. This is the time to relax, let go, and just be. Just let it all go.

And then, setting aside our effort, we can come back to the posture. In doing this, we are subtly changing the feeling of being with the posture. Rather than trying to "get it right" and "succeed," we are softening, accepting that we are lost right now, and then, with an open heart and an open body, going for refuge and protection to the Soma. This is how to move forward, just by coming back to the posture. And we can talk to our Soma: "What do I need to be seeing right now? What do I need to be aware of? Some part of me is feeling frozen and dead. What is going on here?"

What may come up is that we realize we feel there is some kind of barrier between us, the self-conscious practitioner, and our lived experience. We may

feel as if we are on the surface looking down *at* our experience rather than being *within* it. For me, this separated feeling has come up in the image of a pane of glass dividing me from the warm, rich, shadowy, slowly churning experience of “below.” And so now, turning toward what has arisen, we can ask, “What is it about this part of me that is holding itself back, keeping itself aloof, above it all?” And we can be with it and feel into it and see what might be there in the way of a further journey for it.

Through this approach, we are making room for injured, tormented parts of ourselves in need of healing to come to the surface. You will have your own version of these sorts of separation experiences and these kinds of questions. Don’t be shy about using them. Here, as always in our life, when we lose the thread, like a small child adrift and lost on a darkened sea, we call to the Soma for help and go with what comes back to us. In Tibetan tradition, this is known as “calling to the teacher from afar.”

Let’s consider the second case, that of feeling overwhelmed and flooded. We need to look more closely at this one, since this is the far more likely occurrence as our practice matures. Sometimes our traumas, core or otherwise, will show right up in our practice. Far from feeling dead, as when we get stuck, we may feel inundated with painful feelings. Here is a mundane example that, at first glance, seems very far removed indeed from anything we might call “trauma.” What is so interesting about this example is that it shows how our somatic meditation can, by beginning with a symptom of our trauma, give us access to core traumas that otherwise we would completely miss. It provides the opportunity to work with ourselves at a deeply transformative level even amid what otherwise seems to us our completely normal, nontraumatic life.

Suppose we absolutely adore chocolate and especially chocolate cake. When we feel bored or anxious, we often think about chocolate cake. So let’s say we are practicing, and we find ourselves suddenly thinking about this delectable, luscious, ever-so-alluring sensorial ocean of rich, gooey, soft, and fragrant chocolate cake that is perhaps right this moment on our kitchen counter, fresh out of the oven, calling to us. Calling us to leave behind all our pain and just plunge right into the dark, warm sweetness of its world; oh, such pleasure, such heavenly bliss! In our imagination, we are taking the chocolate cake in with all of our senses, we can see it, we can smell it, we can feel its texture in our mouth, we are tasting it; and the message of impulse is “You must eat this right now, or else...” But we still have twenty minutes to go in our meditation session. “Oh my heavens, I can’t breathe; I feel weak; my blood sugar is dropping; I am going

to keel over; I have to have that cake right now, or I will die.” That’s how it can feel.

We remember the instructions of tradition: come back to the posture; then work with hunger; explore hunger; give it some time and space in your practice and see what happens. “But I can’t; I have to jump up right now and run to the kitchen counter and down that cake, all in one gulp, or...” Then we recall impulse’s insidious deceptions and their ruinous outcomes, and we rely on our commitment and our discipline, and we keep practicing.

It is important *how*, in our practice, we are with this completely debilitating, frightening, totally out-of-control, ravenous hunger we feel. And this process applies to any other threatening affect—anxiety, fear, paranoia, dread, whatever. One approach would be to try to turn away from the feeling, to distract ourselves from it by going back to the breath or trying to ignore it or thinking about something else. That is the approach of disconnection, basically a purely mental, top-down effort. Even if we try it, this will quickly fail because we are working with the body and becoming ever so much more sensitive to what is going on there.

The second possibility, the most likely one for somatic meditators, will be to find ourselves merging with the feeling and just allow ourselves to be engulfed by it. But we must avoid both the extreme of turning away from and the extreme of giving in to the overwhelm. We must be fully with the hunger and all the accompanying feelings, but in a particular way. In the somatic approach, the key instruction is to *explore* hunger, to give it some time and space in your practice and see what happens. In other words, once again, rather than shunning it or being engulfed, you can turn toward your hunger from the basic space of Soma, with openness and curiosity, but at the same time ever deeply rooted in your body’s intelligence. You are experiencing the hunger but not identifying with the experience.

The process might look like this. The insatiable feeling arises; you see it, and you know it well. You feel yourself either turning away from or falling victim to its deluge. Now you come back to the posture. It is a very literal physical process at this point. Go through the main steps of the posture. Here you are connecting fully with your body and how it is right now; and by doing this, you are connecting with the basic Soma, your deepest, unconditioned self, the impartial witness that underlies your experience. Through this process, you are deactivating yourself; you are downregulating. But the journey has only just

begun. Having grounded ourselves in the ultimate Soma, having come back to ourselves, now the relative world of phenomena calls us but in a different way.

From this open and rooted place, you can turn toward the hunger. You can ask, “Something in me feels incredibly out-of-control hungry. What about that ‘something’?” You can use techniques such as approaching your hunger with impartial curiosity; welcoming it; acknowledging its distress: offering to keep it company, to sit with it. In this way, from the space of the impartial intelligence of the basic Soma, we are able to be with these very difficult feelings without being further activated or taken over by them. Somehow being in the body in this way is very reassuring. Then you can remain with the hunger and wait to see where it wants to go, what it may have to show you. We are taking an attitude of sacredness toward whatever is occurring—even ravenous, catastrophic hunger—as an invitation from the universe. This is the distinctive Vajrayana approach.

In abstract terms, the hunger is coming up as a very powerful feeling-evaluation, the skandha of grasping, and the urge to go along with impulse can feel almost irresistible. At this point, we really are on the razor’s edge. It’s a matter of life or death, kill or cure. If we give in to the impulse as a way to get rid of this tormenting feeling, we lose an enormous opportunity and will just deepen the neurological ruts of compulsive eating to pacify ourselves. But if we hunker down and hang on to our meditation cushion for dear life, then we can track that frightening feeling-evaluation and ask ourselves, “What wants to be experienced behind the phantasmagoria of the chocolate cake’s insane allure? What further journey can happen here?”

And the journey that unfolds could be quite significant for us. Any kind of overwhelming affect such as this—even if it seems normal to us—is likely a core trauma appearing to our consciousness for connection and healing. If so, likely what we learn can further unravel the tangle of a basic life issue. This whole process expresses an attitude of tremendous kindness and gentleness and, in fact, love toward that something, all those somethings, that are tormented in us and tormenting us. In my case, that kind of insane hunger traces itself all the way back perhaps to the first year of life, when I wasn’t consistently fed when ravenously and terrifyingly hungry. Once we are able to link back to the original trauma, we see how such a fundamental early experience unfolds its patterns of dysfunction and fear through our whole life. When we not so much see but feel the path from now to then and afterward then to now, we can work with our core traumas without being blindly controlled by them. They become like a family member who is having a hard time right now but whom we are willing to be

with, to understand, appreciate, and eventually even learn how to love.

So we work with our hunger in this way and then, somewhere down the road, we notice that something has shifted. The irresistible, overwhelming, compulsive quality in our lust for the chocolate cake is suddenly something different. The lust may turn up, but it is softer, and there is a lot of space around it, so we can actually relate to it rather than having to run from it or being taken over and controlled by it. What happened? It seems that something in the hunger itself feels different and that our relationship to it has changed.

Abruptly, we find ourselves contemplating eating the cake with a different mind, one that is much bigger and more grounded in our body and our larger, somatic person. “Once I am relating with my feeling and not escaping from it via impulse, do I—does my body, does anything in me—really still want to eat that cake? If so, how will I feel afterward? What about the feeling of being stuffed, the nausea, the sugar rush, the plummeting blood sugar that follows? Then what? Is there something else I could eat that would make me feel better, more healthy, more grounded in my body? Does my body, right now, want something different? Am I even hungry? Why am I thinking about this anyway?” There is just a lot more room for the relationship to this part of ourselves.

The question “Am I even hungry?” is a very interesting one. In this context, I am mindful that all of us in the modern, affluent Western industrialized world have an eating disorder of one sort or another. By “eating disorder,” I mean consuming food and drink not out of any actual biological need but far in excess of that, as a way to make ourselves feel better emotionally. As is all too well known, we will consume food that is actually harmful and even toxic to our bodies in the attempt to manage our painful emotional life.

As I write this, except for some teaching, I have been in solitary retreat for the better part of eighteen months. During this time, owing to my own history of trauma in this area, I have been looking into hunger, what is real and what is the product of my anxious mind wanting to numb out—anxious about “Will I get enough food?”—a very ancient fear for me. Occasionally I will fast and, in that state, go out on my daily hike, a two-hour round trip up the slope above my retreat space in the Crestone mountains. Over and over, what I have found is that while I may start out feeling and thinking, “I am hungry,” and feeling much fear, after a time, if I pay attention to my body, I can feel it somehow normalizing and regularizing itself and, through the exercise, detoxifying itself. The hunger fades into the background, and there is a profound sense of well-being in my body. My

body expresses itself to be very, very happy with what I am doing. So while my mind may be “hungry,” my body isn’t. It is clear not only that food is not needed but that the body likes the break from eating and the opportunity to reset itself. My own feeling is that when we are ravenous with suspected emotional hunger, learning to ask the body, “Is there any actual hunger here?” and learning to reside within the body and read the body’s response could be a breakthrough therapy that might help people with all kinds of eating disorders.

Working with Charged Content in Our Practice

As we carry forward, then, the appearance of strong impulse—often with likely connections to core traumas—is going to be an aspect of our ongoing practice. It is a fact of our spiritual life, not some special “problem,” though it can be especially challenging. Let me review, in more general terms, my suggested procedure for working with these kinds of strong affects and the rabid impulsiveness that sometimes accompanies them. In particular, I want to offer further instructions on what to do when an especially painful affect disrupts our practice.

Let’s say that some highly charged content has come up. We try to work with the posture, we try to work with the breath. No luck. We are completely pulled out of our practice and feel like we are being devoured by our activation, our emotional upheaval. Maybe we can feel the panic begin to rise in us.

Relax; take a breath. Settle back into your body. Everything is okay. Take whatever amount of time you need to simply let go of your angst and be. When you feel ready, come back to the posture; try to reconnect with and be in your body. You can do this by just noticing where you can feel your body. Once you are back more or less in contact with your body, then go through the points of the posture until you feel as grounded and anchored as possible. Especially important are the instructions about the straight back, the lifting head, and the dropping chin. By attending to those, you are downregulating yourself in one of the most direct ways available and anchoring yourself in your basic being.

You may want to spend some significant amount of time just breathing into the lower belly. This is perhaps the most powerful technique known for activating the dorsal vagus nerve, the aspect of our polyvagal system that directly downregulates our sympathetic nervous system’s fight, flight, or freeze response. Activating this nerve, which runs from the brain stem into the lower

belly, brings online our parasympathetic nervous system, that part of our system associated with feelings of peace, connection, healing, and well-being. Keep breathing into your lower belly until the storms abate, at least to the point of being tolerable.

Coming back to the posture, as we have seen, already involves reconnecting with your basic, unconditioned self. Now relax and try to connect further with the open, impartial awareness of the Soma. Feel the space; try to let yourself rest into it. Notice that the painful emotion has a different impact when you sense the openness behind it. Allow yourself to contemplate the difficult emotional context from that clear and open space.

Then, finally, sit with your upheaval or your activation, acknowledging it and deeply feeling it but not being taken over by it. Most likely, it is already in a different state or on the way there. You could say to yourself, “Some part of me is feeling hungry.” That in itself suggests that not all of you is overcome with hunger, just a part of you, and another part—your fundamental, timeless awareness—is aware of that first part. This method is widely used by practitioners in the Focusing movement to help clients stay present and connected but not be overwhelmed by strong feelings. This technique will help us stay connected with the impartial awareness of the basic Soma and also remain in connection with—“turned toward,” in our terms—the charged feeling and its need to be felt, seen, and healed.

To repeat, viewing that part from the nonjudgmental awareness of the basic nature of whatever the strong conflict in question is, we might ask, “What is it about this part? What is going on? What do I need to see here?” Give yourself the space and the time to make a journey with this aspect of yourself. What you are doing is inviting it into your meditation practice, including it in your life, integrating its energy and its life into your conscious journey. When we do this, sooner or later the Soma will offer an answer. This will not be a conceptual answer but will come in the form of the felt shift, the somatic transformation, I talked about above. It is an experiential breakthrough in which we just find ourselves in a different place vis-à-vis our hunger. There is no work more spiritual and more spiritually transformative than this.

When we get stuck or triggered and are then hijacked into thinking, there is likely to be a tendency for us to believe there is something wrong with us or with our practice. Maybe we aren’t trying hard enough; maybe we are incapable after all. This could be a ripe occasion for whatever self-doubt or self-criticism is

buried in us from who knows when to arise. However, any thinking like this is not going to lead us in a helpful direction.

In fact, becoming suddenly triggered in our practice, finding ourselves activated and emotionally beside ourselves, are signs that our practice is progressing just beautifully, right on schedule. This is because the path to realization involves unlocking the gates of hell, so to speak, and freeing all the prisoners, the traumatized parts of ourselves, from their otherwise endless suffering. The prisoners, these aspects of ourselves, have been shut away in the dungeons of unawareness, unconsciousness, where there is no fresh air and no life. These prisoners have, in fact, been held in safekeeping by our Soma; but now the Soma senses that it is time for them to rejoin our conscious awareness as valued, respected, and often highly creative aspects of our life, augmenting our consciousness and deepening it.

When we are providing enormous space, openness, and accommodation in our basic mind, the next thing that happens is that all of these unresolved experiences now want to come to the surface; the body wants to bring them to awareness to seek healing, completion, release. The more space we provide by resting in our Soma, in our basic nature and its brilliant openness, the more such experiences show up. And the more we can make room for them and work to allow them to find their own completion, the more open, wholesome, and free our entire state of being feels.

So if we find demons coming to tea, not to worry. We have the tools to acknowledge and appreciate them, welcome them and help them heal, no matter how ornery they may be. Somatic meditation and the appearance of core traumas go hand in hand; there is no way around it. You meditate, and the large and little traumas of your life come knocking at the door. But, to say again, the fact that they are showing up is good news, for they are offering the somatically grounded practitioner the opportunity for a life larger and more abundant than ever we could have imagined.

In conclusion, I hope it is clear that I am not suggesting somatic meditation as an alternative to therapy when we are in need of it. But I am saying that difficult experiences with trauma connections, whether they represent the tip of the iceberg or are more full-blown, are simply a part of practice, as they are of life. And I am suggesting somatic meditation as a way to work with them simply, gracefully, toward our own empowerment and transformation, not just when we get stuck, but over the course of our whole life.

The Wonders of the Natural Body

The Perpetual Open-Endedness of the Practice

The cultivation of Pure Awareness does *not* evolve in a straight line. It is not that we have a certain realization and then it is ours and we can hang on to it and in the next practice session begin from there and move on to the next higher realization. Every time we sit down to practice, it's a brand new situation, a new journey. "Back to square one," as Trungpa Rinpoche used to say. Back to Suzuki Roshi's "beginner's mind."

Each time we meditate, we will begin in a different place, different things will happen, and we will end up in a different world. We all want a template showing us how it is supposed to be. But there isn't one. If we look closely, in fact, everything is likely to be quite unfamiliar. One day we begin with a puny habitual mind and arrive at an extraordinarily open place; the next day we start wide open and wind up buried under an avalanche of discursive thoughts and neurotic upheaval. Another time, we will wake up feeling so rotten that there is no way we are ever going to practice because there is no way our mind could emerge from underneath all this garbage. But, committed as we are and respectful of the discipline, we sit down anyway, and soon enough our awareness suddenly and dramatically opens to reveal stunning vistas never before seen. It is all so wonderful and amazing, but also in a way disconcerting, because in relation to our practice there is no ground, nothing to hang on to, and no way to really control our experience. We can only open, let go, and trust. But that is exactly what the posture of Pure Awareness has equipped us to do.

These things happen in the natural course of meditation, and after a while you just give up trying to judge or evaluate your practice at all. It is not only

pointless to do so, but way too exhausting. You really want to be doing something else with your life besides wasting your time and energy on judging your practice; you want to live. That is why you entered this world of meditation in the first place.

Spontaneous Realizations

As we are immersed in our daily lives, the realization of Pure Awareness can come to us quite spontaneously and unexpectedly. We can be engaged with some project or task, and all of a sudden our relative mind, with all of its stickiness, emotional ambiguity, and distraction, just drops away. Then we are left with the simple reality of what lies before us. Utter silence. Just this. This is similar to the earlier example of being in a hospital with a staff person, coming into our Soma, and really seeing her in herself and from her own side; but now I am talking about something slightly different. Owing to our training, the realization can be spontaneous, with no intention or effort on our side. Suddenly “what there is to experience” is right there before us.

Perhaps quite strangely, this realization can apply not only to the “other” of external people and events, but also to the “other” that is our own unanticipated physical and psychological experience. We abruptly see this “other” stripped of all our thinking, in its own bare facticity; it is just what it is, with nothing added. The sheer reality of it can be so ordinary, yet so naked and so intense and even overwhelming, there is nothing that could possibly be thought about it and nowhere to go with it. It has the feeling of being final and absolute. How can this be said about our own ordinary, transient, relative experience? And yet it is so.

Whether this realization comes to us spontaneously or in the context of applied effort, it is felt as an enormous relief, even sometimes as an ecstatic rush of freedom. The relief is both relief from and also relief for. It is *relief from* the effort and conflict of working to maintain a continuous mental narrative while we are trying to be present to something, which we now experience as extraordinarily burdensome and stressful. This is like trying to concentrate on a book we are reading while a radio is blaring or people are having an argument right next to us. But as a consequence of our sustained practice, when the mental narrative drops away—when somebody turns off the radio or the arguing voices cease—there is immediately a feeling of space and silence, and within that we find ourselves completely present, without any effort at all. For an astounding

instant, there is no “me” getting in between ourselves and the “other.” We may even realize that, to our astonishment, we actually were already—and always have been—somatically present; we just didn’t see it because of all the thinking.

Further, it is *relief* for being able to experience our life—Life itself—without distraction. We can ask, with wonderment, “Why am I living this experience at this moment? Why are these specific ‘others’ turning up in my life just now?” We begin to sense that the universe is tumbling toward us with an infallible but unfathomable logic of its own: things arrive in our field of experience for our own development, yes, but also for theirs, because of everything and because of nothing. We begin to suspect that every form of being, from the most minuscule up to the grandest, has its own intelligence, its own journey, and its own reason for existing. As Gerard Manley Hopkins says in his poem “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” every form of being in the universe, animate and inanimate, exists for no other reason than to be itself and to proclaim itself, to “fling out broad its name.../ Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*”

This is, ultimately, “what there is to experience.” This is the radiance of emptiness, the expressiveness of emptiness (*shunyata*). When anything enters our field of experience, it comes not just to us or for us, as we usually think, but—to say again—it also comes on its own behalf, on its own business, its own mission. I am talking about any situation or emotion, any person. For us to not engage it fully means we are failing to respond to its call; we are deficient in the imperative to engage implied in all relationships. In the face of this fracture, there is inevitably a subtle guilt—even if it is mostly unconscious. Hence the constant self-justification of discursive thought. This lies behind the stress and the disquieting feeling, however subtle, that always accompanies our turning away not just from people but from any experience of any “other.” When, instead, we turn *toward*, we fulfill the existential—dare I say “cosmic”—call of relationality, and this deepens our sense of relief, of being, and of the meaning of our life. Simultaneously, our thinking mind falls into beatific silence.

The Creativity of Pure Awareness and Interpersonal Relationships

The groundless space that is opened up by this approach can thus be a most creative one. Once impulse is denied its day and we are willing to abide in the open uncertainty of the interrelational situation, something truly fresh can arise. In the sitting practice of Pure Awareness, by abandoning everything except

identifying with the posture and simply being, we make room for the journey of our own life to unfold according to its own mysterious template, its own wisdom. We have taken the monumental step of being willing to live our own fate. In the same way, in ordinary life, by boycotting impulse and being willing to stay with the indeterminate relational space that that opens up, we make room for the journey of relationality with other people.

For, we begin to discover, each relationship of ours is in and of itself, a distinct being or “person,” a “two by two” entity, in Thornton Wilder’s lovely phrase.¹ Each relationship is a form and force of being in and of itself, and it has a journey within it that is continually calling out its inner imperative. The relationship of you and me, this mysterious two-by-two entity, wants to unfold according to its own destiny. Anything could happen, but it is emerging from an immaculate space and bears the seal of reality. The practice of Pure Awareness, in its unfathomable, miraculous alchemy, calls us to this understanding of relationship and shows us how to honor it, surrender to it, be with it, and be forever changed by it.

Again, as the Zen saying goes, “Set aside all external involvements and let the ten thousand things be.” It is perhaps not difficult to see how this applies in sitting practice. We release the idea of an inherently promising or problematic external world that we have to manage, care for, and obsess about; and by coming back over and over to our posture, we are able to let go of mentally hanging on to what seems to be outside of us. We simply let the external world go its own way, and we abide in the self-sufficiency and inner peace of our own nature.

But how, in an interpersonal situation, can we “set aside all external involvements”? As we are face-to-face with this other person, we resist the temptation to react. We let go of our rising ire or fear or hope and come back to our own Soma, thereby releasing our idea that the other is a project or problem—our project or problem. We let the person be who he or she is without our meddling, self-absorbed interpretations. We return to the space of simply being. The return, then, is not quite pushing away the other. Rather, by setting aside our investment in who or what the other is, we return to our own inner plenitude, freedom, and fulfillment. Then, resting within the vast openness of our basic nature, we are able to experience “what there is to experience”: to behold the other in his or her own ineffable truth and reality.

The point to emphasize here is how extraordinarily and entirely experiential—

that is, somatic—this realization is. When we let go of our reactivity and return to our own basic being, our experience of the other, “what there is to experience,” can abruptly open up. We see the person as he or she is, see the mystery of his or her own life, how this person is abiding in his or her own wholeness, purity, and perfection. All of this has come out of an interaction that a moment ago may have seemed problematic, rife with potential gratification or conflict, and fraught with danger. And yet now, the possibilities opening before us are endless, and the potential creativity here is immense. This realization is the basis of loving-kindness, compassion, and ethics in Buddhism.

The Beauty of the Practice of Pure Awareness

The practice of Pure Awareness does not solve all of our problems. In fact, in a way it doesn't solve any of them. What it does do, though, is to show us how to work in the most creative way possible with the problems that we have, whatever these may be. It is often said that the path does not depend in any way on the relative circumstances of our life, no matter what these may be. This is because the ultimate purpose of the practice of Pure Awareness is not to manipulate our relative reality—whether it consists of external situations or internal states of mind—into a “better” place. Rather, its purpose is to help us to discover the truth and reality—the “purpose,” the process, the sacredness, the ultimate meaning, if you will—that lie inherent in what our life already is, right at this moment. And out of that, the spontaneous movement implicit in this moment is able to occur.

No matter what our life may be right now, whether we are feeling pleasure or pain, whether we are living or dying, in a sense it is the perfect life for us. This is because it is right here and nowhere else, in this situation, this moment, that we meet what is ultimately real and meaningful in the universe. It is here that we discover our purpose for being and find the gate to our ultimate fulfillment. And we are invited to see that ultimate fulfillment is not at the end of some long road but is already fully and completely present to us in this moment of life as it unfolds in us on its way toward the future. Ultimacy is to be found, not in some other time and place, but only right here, right now.

As we have learned, the practice of Pure Awareness enables us to see this by disclosing to us the uncultivated field of being—the illimitable expanse of our own awareness—that undergirds our “self” and all our experience. Only when

we are tapped into this field are we able to relinquish the conventional, ego-based, delusional judgmentalism that sees everything as tainted, hackneyed, and meaningless. It can never be said too often: from the deeper place, we are able to behold the ultimate meaning that is already here, just waiting to be discovered precisely in our own unique life, in all of its details, all of its light and shadows, its movement forever forward and unfolding.

In a sense, then, we could say that while the practice of Pure Awareness doesn't resolve any specific problematic circumstance of our life, it does address the problem that underlies all "problems": this is a life lived without depth and without any real understanding of its meaning. When there is no depth in our life, when we live strictly on the surface of day-to-day experiences, all the frustrations, confusions, and big and little torments seem overwhelming, threatening, random, and pointless. They tear us down and leave us feeling weary and wasted. Living in a superficial and meaningless world, we seek relief on a case-by-case basis, trying to console ourselves and control the mounting feeling of being helpless amid life's incessant onslaughts.

The tragedy of a life lived on the surface, without any fundamental meaning, does not pertain only to ourselves as individuals. In fact, as I think is so very evident today, the sense of the meaninglessness of life is becoming more and more pervasive in modern society. Viktor Frankl, for example, in *Man's Search for Meaning*, wrote that the most telling of all modern problems is the increasing feeling that life, in both the big picture and the small details, has no value and no purpose; that ultimately no meaning underlies all the seemingly endless procession of unresolvable sufferings and dysfunctions that so many of us experience; and that it is this feeling of meaninglessness that undermines and even destroys so many lives. According to Frankl, this is an existential nihilism before which external remedies and palliatives are powerless and completely ineffectual.

The practice of Pure Awareness addresses the problem of meaninglessness, not through quick fixes or materialistic diversions or by imposing some particular meaning onto life, as do so many philosophies, psychologies, religions, and spiritual traditions. Instead, the practice of Pure Awareness provides a vantage point—the unconditioned depth within—from which we can discover not just the meaning and purpose that are already implicit in our own individual lives but, even more, how that meaning and purpose are reflections of, in harmony with, and furthermore participate in the ultimate meaningfulness of life itself in its largest compass—in other words, how our life is an expression of

the infinite meaning of being itself.

The practice of Pure Awareness thus enables us to return to the seemingly quotidian reality of our own life, our human aspirations and fears, our human frailty and confusion, our health and sickness, even our dying and our death, and find in each of them an expression of the ultimate meaning of our existence. This is a revelation that no one can ever take away and no experience can ever destroy.

Put simply, when our lives are viewed from the deeper perspective of the limitless, uncultivated field of being, on the one hand there is a profound acceptance of the givenness of our lives: who and what we are, what and how the world is, right at this moment. And, in a strange sense, also an understanding of “why” everything is, though this “why” can never be put into words—it is simply a revelation of the full depth of the nature of things. From the viewpoint of Vajrayana, this kind of thorough, nonconceptual, unconditional acceptance of concrete reality is the only possible ground for our own being to meet our world. And further, when we do meet reality in all its givenness in this way, it calls us out—indeed, compels us—to a unique, human response. This is, of course, the third quality of Pure Awareness, spontaneous response.

The deeper our practice of Pure Awareness, the more our most profound wells of connection, responsiveness, and love are opened, and the more the waters of selfless compassion are able to flow forth. Meantime, we remain rooted in the eternity, so to speak, of our basic being and are able to feel the very heartbeat and sacredness of life itself in us and all others. That leads us to love, fearlessly, recklessly, unconditionally.

This helps explain the depth of ease, satisfaction, well-being, peace, and fulfillment that emerges over time from our practice of Pure Awareness. Especially if we are new to the practice, it can sometimes seem like such a tedious, boring, life-denying thing. But if the practice of Pure Awareness aimed to separate us from our lives, then there would always remain some kind of bracing in relation to what we were distancing ourselves from, which sets up a psychological tension, a pushback against experience of the world that wants to come in. And it is precisely this bracing and resulting mental tension, reflecting disconnection, that the somatic practice aims to dissolve utterly.

This pushing away of life, which is deeply problematic and appears in many forms of modern spiritual practice, arrives partly from our side, from a misunderstanding of the journey, and partly from the side of the universe, which

has a natural claim on us as humans that we try to ignore. From our side, we cling to a mistaken idea: as I've been saying, we try to maintain the view, sometimes quite unconsciously, that our practice should involve a devaluation of ordinary life and ordinary experience, a privileging of a state of mind that is free from the annoyances, dissatisfactions, and sufferings of daily existence.

But—and this is a subtle point, already suggested—the tension we feel also comes from the side of the universe. For within the Vajrayana perspective, as mentioned, every form of being—whether animate or inanimate, from a subatomic particle up to the totality of the known and unknown cosmos itself—has its own style of awareness, its own purpose, and its own life. Moreover, each of these lives is in intimate connection and even communion with every other. And we, along with everything else, participate in that limitless interbeing. In that sense, every form of being has a claim on us—a command, perhaps—that in order to be whole we must acknowledge, accept, and surrender to it as a partner in the endless, interconnected dance of life.

From this standpoint, the idea that our spiritual fulfillment can come only by separating ourselves from the totality is the ultimate delusion, an attainment that might best be called “ultimate egohood.” In this ultimate egohood, the spiritually separate self is taken as the ultimate reality. It is the left brain finally getting its way. From this trap, at least according to Buddhism, escape is nearly impossible.

PART FIVE

Shila: Establishing a Container for Our Practice

Shila, the Crucible and Protection of Our Practice

What Is Shila and Why Is It Important?

In Western adaptations of Buddhism, including the mindfulness movement, it is often assumed that meditation can be fruitfully practiced by itself, in isolation from other elements of the tradition, such as a strong intentional commitment, study, ethics, morality, a clear long-term path to follow, community, mentoring, and some kind of organizational or institutional form. It can hardly be disputed that there are some real gains to be made for modern people by sitting quietly, even for just a few minutes a day, and using a simple meditation technique, without any particular commitment or any of the other traditional features, supports, or resources. At the same time, if we are talking about the full human journey that meditation makes possible, my own experience as a meditation teacher over many years suggests that meditation by itself is simply not enough. As mentioned, we do need to strip away the inessential, no longer relevant or helpful Asian cultural aspects of meditation in order to find the genuine spirituality and transformation we are looking for. But if we strip away too much, we are likely going to be left dead in the water.

Beginning with a simple meditation technique, including a somatic one, and nothing else is not a bad place to start. At a certain point, though, you may sense that you are just recycling the same thoughts and experiences over and over and you may want more. But more of what, and how to we go about obtaining it? Now we are back to the core issue I mentioned early in this book. Which aspects of the tradition are actually necessary to make the journey that meditation offers, and which are not? This is the great conundrum of meditation in the modern world, and I don't know of anyone who can speak with final authority to this

question. Further, of the aspects that may be deemed necessary, can we simply adopt Asian forms? My experience indicates that we cannot. But then how do we arrive at the forms that are crucial to the “more” we seek?

Among all the traditional features that could be or need to be discussed in this regard, there is one that I would like to highlight here as being of special importance to our contemporary practice. This is what Buddhists term *shila*: most simply, “conduct.” Our consideration of this topic is additionally important for us because it is indicative of the kind of questioning, sorting, and culling that we need to do in relation to all the other traditional supports to the meditative process.

The term “shila” has no exact equivalent in English, but it refers generally to some kind of commitment to a wholesome life and behavior that one takes on in the service of one’s meditative journey. Depending on its context, shila can include connotations such as conduct, decorum, discipline, basic human decency, ethics, morality, monastic life rule, and even what we might call a “healthy lifestyle.” For modern people, many of these translations of shila are problematic because of negative associations from their own experiences. I myself often prefer the gloss “container,” meaning the kind of life situation we need to establish in order to protect, hold, nourish, and optimize our meditative journey. I also like the term “container” because it suggests the largest meaning of shila in Asia: in other words, it includes everything we do in our life, when we are not on the meditation cushion, that impacts our ability to follow the meditative journey toward wholeness and completion.

In my own case, at the beginning, I and other early students of Trungpa Rinpoche were so single-mindedly focused on meditation that few of us gave much thought to the need for a supportive container. Like so many then and now, we thought that if we just meditated enough, it was all we needed to realize our aspiration for transformation and spiritual fulfillment. The message that it was not going to be that simple and that other things were critically needed did not get through at all in the beginning, at least to me, and it has taken me decades to really see, understand, and accept it.

Stated simply, how we conduct ourselves and how we live our life as a whole have enormous implications for what is going to be possible when we sit down to meditate. It is embarrassing to admit, but when I first started doing yearly solitary meditation retreats, I actually used to take my Tibetan dictionaries and texts with me up to my hermitage. The students of Trungpa Rinpoche practiced

in English, one of his great gifts to us, so there was no need for what I was doing. But I wanted to improve my Tibetan, so I would study during breaks. After a couple of years of this it dawned on me that the more I studied in this new way in retreat, the more unsettled and discursive my mind became. So I stopped and noticed quite a difference from then on. That was my first glimmer of how impactful my actions could be on my practice.

Here we are four decades later, and my practice continues to highlight the fact that literally everything we do when we are not on our meditation cushion is going to affect our ability to settle and be fully present, to rest in Pure Awareness. For example, if I need to engage in some business, perhaps reading and responding to a letter or talking to someone on the phone, even if the interaction is benign, it is absolutely guaranteed that it is going to find its way into my practice. I may sit down with the intention of resting in just being, but thoughts relating to what I was doing come up and demand attention. Or, again, if somebody has to come over to my retreat cabin to repair a roof leak, help me with the heating system, or attend to the plumbing, even if the interaction is pleasant and positive, it's certain that it will find its way into my practice session.

Now of course I wish that I were more stable in my practice so that no matter what happens, I could settle right back, fully and completely—or never depart in the first place. That certainly is my long-range aspiration. But I have to be realistic. Rather than getting lost in self-recriminations or wishful thinking, it is better to address my lack of stabilization directly. As the tradition itself says, if you want your awareness to be simple, straightforward, and clear, you have to simplify your life, eliminating unnecessary activities and clearing it of influences that are going to stir you up. This is really what shila is all about: folks living “in the world,” as most of us modern practitioners do, looking at our life, simplifying it so that we are doing only what is really and absolutely necessary, and noticing what kinds of things actually pull us off track.

When we are able to simplify, we can see that it makes all the difference. We notice that we are so much more able than usual to be present, open, peaceful, and clear. By contrast, when we have allowed all kinds of extraneous and unnecessary situations, activities, people, diversions, and distractions to overwhelm our life, we sit there thinking, thinking, thinking, just waiting for our session to be over. Then we may conclude that we are bad meditators; we aren't trying hard enough; we are flawed. What we perhaps do not realize is that our difficulties have less to do with our capacity for meditation and much more to do

with our having given our power over to nonessential complications.

Shila, then, helps us see how important it is that, as part of our path, we go about the business of our life in a way that supports our journey. There are two principal themes to shila: cultivating a way of life that (1) facilitates our own meditation practice and (2) avoids any actions that might be harmful to others or impede their own journeys. These are inseparable because, deeply social beings that we are, our own ability to feel peace and well-being is inextricably bound up with the health and harmony of those around us and especially of those with whom we are in close relationship. Attending to our web of relationships may not be a top priority for us at this moment in our practice; this is often the case when we are just learning to meditate. But we will quickly learn that it is not possible for us to feel at one with ourselves if we are engaged in actions or relationships that undermine, disrupt, or harm others.

If you were a practitioner in a traditional Buddhist setting, of course, your mentor or your community would assign you various specific shilas—rules, regulations, and protocols—that you would be expected to follow. This is how shila was traditionally practiced and fulfilled in Asia. These shilas would differ, depending on whether you were a monk or nun living within a monastic community, a hermit living and meditating in the wilds, or a layperson living in the world as a householder. In our day and age, modern people do follow one or another of these traditional lifestyles and some do elect to take on the associated Asian behavioral, moral, and ethical codes. But for the majority of us, the traditional shilas as given are inappropriate and even counterproductive. They can easily lead us away from our goal rather than toward it.

In our world, while the traditional behavioral templates can offer important suggestions and guidelines, for most of us they are not going to be able to provide an adequate behavioral container for our journey. Because the modern world is so very different from the original social and cultural contexts of the Eastern meditative traditions, we are going to have to look freshly and without preconceptions at both concerns mentioned above: what kinds of actions and behaviors immediately support and protect our own journey and also what it means to be in “right relation” to others and how we can accomplish that. Because our situation is so different, both the areas we need to address and also the answers we come up with will of necessity be new ones that were perhaps unimaginable in the past.

To restate the essential point: *How we go about our ordinary life off the*

cushion will make all the difference in terms of how things are going to go for us on the cushion, when engaged in meditation. Either our practice is encouraged and protected, or it is impeded, undermined, and perhaps even derailed.

Shila and Resistance

Let's begin with the challenge of simply making room in our life for our meditation practice. The prospect of meditating, of simply going to our cushion and sitting down, often brings up a great deal of resistance. It is surprising how many misconceptions we can have about resistance in meditation practice. Sometimes we think that our feeling of resistance means that we are not suited to meditation; or that our current life is incompatible with it; or that somehow we *shouldn't* feel resistance; or that if we just apply the right technique, we won't feel the paralysis that our resistance sometimes brings. And, more of a problem down the road is that many of us think that after we "get better" at meditating, we won't run into resistance anymore.

The perhaps alarming fact is that resistance is a part of the journey at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. One of the most telling parts of the Buddha's biography is the description of *his* resistance on the night of his enlightenment. This appears in the story of his encounter with the demon Mara's seductive daughters and his threatening army of fellow demons. The story of Mara is a traditional way of talking about resistance, in this case, the fear (skandha 2) and impulsive temptation (skandha 3) the Buddha ran into even in the final moment before full realization. When the fear and the temptation to run away came up with Mara's appearance, the Buddha hesitated about his quest; was realization a real possibility or just his wishful thinking? He wasn't sure if the temptation of ultimate pleasure or ultimate power that suddenly surged up in his meditation under the bodhi tree might not be about something attainable after all. Even then, part of him still thought maybe he might be wrong and that Mara—the demon of ego—was right. Gautama was now captured by the thought that he just might possibly still be able to find lasting happiness in ordinary pleasure or power. Have you ever been there? Who hasn't, on a daily basis?

Resistance is the feeling of the conscious, left-brain ego wanting to hang on to its current standpoint, its present version of reality, and its habitual strategy for survival. When we approach our meditation cushion, there is always going to be some part of us that does not want to go there—some part that would prefer to

hang on to what we've got, whatever it is, to believe in the reality of what we think, and to avoid letting go and opening. Our small ego mind, just by its nature, is uncomfortable and anxious at the prospect of having to release its control into the larger space of our basic being. Our small self will do anything it can to avoid sitting down on our cushion and will muster any number of excuses to justify this resistance. It is really quite shocking the way in which the ego's rationales can be so seductive and convincing in the moment.

Here is where shila comes in. The wholesome shila or container of our life, including our commitment, scheduling, and how we are living, creates a context that protects our meditation. Our shila goes a long way toward neutralizing ego's stubborn opposition to our journey. In a way, by creating a supportive container that we are unconditionally committed to, we are enlisting our ego's managerial capacities—which are, in and of themselves, quite healthy—to facilitate our practice.

For instance, the necessity of a good container is illustrated by *the need for an appropriate place* where we meditate. At home, a dedicated room or just a quiet corner in the house will do. If we try to meditate in a room where people are holding a conversation, or the TV is blaring, or the phone is ringing continually, it will be very difficult for us to fully show up, settle into the posture, and be present.

A supportive container also needs to address *the time* when we practice; this implies intelligent scheduling. For example, meditating at the same time every day offers maximum stability for most of us. Practicing first thing in the morning provides the most reliable time for most people, before our day and our mind have gone into high gear and spun into the chaos of mundane life. Though sometimes rescheduling may be unavoidable, if we are continually moving our meditation time around or telling ourselves that we will practice later in the day, we become vulnerable not only to our own ever-present tendency toward resistance but also to the unexpected circumstances that are part of modern life: someone doesn't show up when they are supposed to; a meeting runs late; a sick child needs to be picked up from school; somebody needs to get something for dinner; and so on. I tell my students that while there will occasionally be necessary exceptions, *if meditation isn't your first priority on a daily basis, it is probably going to be your last.*

How we schedule our life *outside* of our practice time also plays an important role here. Let's say we stay up into the wee hours watching TV or hanging out

and socializing. If we even make it out of bed the next morning early enough to meditate before going to work, we may find ourselves suffering through the torture of being completely exhausted. We just sit there wishing dearly that we were still asleep. If this becomes a pattern, eventually we may find the pleasures of our nighttime distractions overriding our inspiration to meditate in the morning and even silencing our guilt at not doing so. We seem to lose the thread, and pretty soon we just don't get up early enough to practice anymore. It is simply easier, for all of us, to be checked out and numb. It is not uncommon to conclude that meditation is not for us and to abandon our practice. This is very sad, because the problem was not with us or our practice on any fundamental level; we just weren't savvy enough to provide a strong container for ourselves. We left our ego too much wiggle room.

Shila and Substance Abuse

A concern of traditional Asian Buddhist shila, and very relevant to us, is substance abuse, addressed with recommendations that practitioners abstain from drinking alcohol or at least avoid drinking to the point where it clouds the mind. Contemporary Asian teachers also often include recreational drugs in this shila. A meeting with His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa provides a telling example. As a graduate student in the late 1960s, early 1970s, I had stayed away from the wild but also, to me, wildly attractive pot and LSD scene taking place in America at the time. I was in the graduate library all the time, and I felt I largely missed out on what seemed like a colorful, compelling part of this culturally transformative peer group event. When I went to India for dissertation research in 1972, where psychoactive substances were readily available, I was ready to make up for lost time. However, before I had a chance to act on my avidity, at Trungpa Rinpoche's suggestion I visited the Sixteenth Karmapa at his monastery in Sikkim. Without me asking, he gave me refuge; and, again without me asking, he casually mentioned that from now on any kind of drugs were out. So that was that. Of course, now I am very grateful. What would have happened if I had plunged into the recreational drug world that was going on among Westerners of my generation at that time in India?

So why would alcohol and other mind-altering drugs cause problems for our practice specifically? Perhaps the most important reason is the impression that drugs bring about the same spiritual insight and realization as meditation, but using them is easier; it requires much less work. This was, and still is, the belief

of many spiritually inclined recreational and mind-altering drug enthusiasts. When meditation becomes really difficult, many young people I have worked with over the years—and some who are not so young—will take or at least try the drug route. How many times have I been told, “Oh, so-and-so was struggling with his or her practice and decided to go to Peru to study with an ayahuasca shaman”? I am not saying that this cannot be valuable and, in the case of serious illness, sometimes very impactful. But it isn’t meditation and does not bring about the same results.

To this point, Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson, in their book *Altered Traits*, make the important distinction between “altered states”—the highs, the temporary experiences we may have with meditation or with drugs—and “altered traits,” the fundamental transformation of our personality that can occur through sustained meditation.¹ In scientific studies of both those who take drugs for spiritual reasons and those who practice meditation over a period of time, we have telling proof: while a life of meditation demonstrably does transform your basic neurology—how you perceive, experience, understand, and think about the world, how you are with others, how you act, and your basic state of being—drugs do not.² My own experiences with students over many decades suggest that you can take all the mind-altering drugs you want, but you remain the same basic person you always were. Appearances notwithstanding, nothing in you fundamentally changes.

Secondly, if we are taking mind-altering drugs and at the same time trying to meditate, there are going to be serious problems. The basic somatic state that we bring to our practice can in fact be heavily affected by alcohol, drug use, and even overindulgence in sugar, caffeine, and junk food, with all its noxious fats and artificial additives. The hungover, spacey, imbalanced, or toxic states that these can result in make meditation a miserable struggle for which we may have little energy and which we may not even want to undertake.

Of course, in Buddhism there are few absolutes. The key point is to find out for ourselves which ingestibles support our meditation and which undermine it. Our best bet is probably going to be the trial-and-error technique. Though it may take time and be heavy on the error side, if we are sincerely committed to our practice, the enormous and painful consequences of what we put in our bodies and the resultant mighty struggle just to get to the cushion will be instructive. Nobody likes that kind of pain, and over time we will modify our behavior so that it is much less in conflict and much more aligned with our practice. We

come to so very greatly prefer the open, relaxed, spacious, easy state of freedom we find in the Soma that we will go to great lengths to clear away what gets in between us and that joyful expanse.

Shila and Social Interactions

Let's return to the other important area of the traditional shilas mentioned above: namely, our relationships and interactions with others. The various Asian traditions provide guidelines, for example, for our speech, our primary way of communicating with others. They advise us to talk to others in a respectful manner; to speak without harshness, rudeness, or aggression; not to hurt, undermine, or manipulate others with our language; to refrain from misleading or lying to people; to avoid gossiping and just filling the space with pointless words; and so on. The interpersonal area of shila is a necessary support for our meditation practice because, as I said, when we behave poorly toward others, we violate their integrity and also our own by disrupting our inborn human sense of connection with them.

Some of us may feel that we don't really care that much about other people and that how we behave toward them is not particularly relevant to our practice. But modern research in neuroscience, neuropsychology, trauma work, and sociology suggests the opposite. Though the effects in many of us may be largely unconscious, violations and disruptions in relation to others seriously compromise our basic feeling as humans within the human community. As regards meditation and especially somatic meditation, which is so inclusive of feelings, if we violate others, we just won't be able to fully settle.

Let's consider an example. Perhaps we had a painful, upsetting, and unresolved interaction with our partner the day before. We wake up feeling that things are really in a bad state. We sit there trying to meditate, and meanwhile our mind is completely overtaken with recycling the situation, awash in rationalizations or self-justifications—or, more creatively, feeling tremendous remorse and trying to think about what could be done to remedy the situation. Sometimes—and perhaps we have all felt this on occasion—it can feel like sheer torture. Even if we come up with a plan, we can't seem to let the matter rest while we practice, and we feel distracted and disrupted. "I might as well just do something else," we think. And sometimes we do have to get up and make amends. While this is absolutely the right thing to do, we cannot help but regret

that our own thoughtless and hurtful behavior has, once again, created problems in this relationship and derailed our own state of being in the bargain—not to mention blown up our practice session.

Somatic meditation, in particular, greatly heightens our sensitivity and awareness of what is going on in our social interactions. Often when I am meditating, what comes up for me is mainly some previously unseen dynamic in my interactions with someone else, some place I was just “off.” It may have only been an opportunity to say something encouraging or helpful that I missed. It is usually something that I had vaguely sensed in my body, lurking at the boundary of my consciousness, but wasn’t paying enough attention to; now, however, in my meditation session, it is suddenly there with unavoidable clarity, and there’s no chance of escape. In somatic meditation, you open, include, and feel; you are not in the business of pushing things away.

Seeing in this way is, of course, often excruciating and humbling—for example, to perceive how insensitive or checked out we were, how aggressive or manipulative, or simply how much we were wrapped up in ourself. Of course, it was our conscious self, our ego, that was wrapped up in itself; our Soma didn’t miss a thing. That is why the feeling is so sharp, poignant, and so unavoidable just now.

So now, sitting, perhaps we see that we have undermined someone else’s sense of personal integrity, value, or self-worth. We did something we needn’t have; we didn’t do something we could and should have. These insights are an essential part of the path, and our best bet is simply to feel remorse as it arises, let the situation sit with us, and just practice alongside this somatic knowledge. Though apologizing is often the right thing to do, in our meditation we see that it is not necessarily that easy, at least for us: hurts and harms are not entirely undone with apologies. In fact, from the somatic, tantric standpoint, they are not undone at all. They now become an enduring part of our history and of our relationship with this other person. They become our situation and our context toward the future. This is not a bad thing—it is how things work and provides new opportunities for connection—but it is a painful thing.

At this point, we ourselves have to make a journey in order to feel, understand, and assimilate what we have done and to find a way to move forward that is authentic. There are no shortcuts or easy tricks to this process. It is true that the more negative the impact of our behavior, the less able we are to be with it and sit in meditation. Of course, we can physically sit there, but

nothing seems to be happening because we are so wrapped up in our feelings and ruminations. Trying to meditate at this point can be similar to being in a violent storm at sea: it is all chaos, and you cannot see anything or even breathe. It is a blessing that, because our practice has given us greatly increased sensitivity and attunement to others, we cannot do the usual thing of pushing what happened aside. But we are in a very painful and poignant situation right now.

Continuing to sit at this time all the way to the end of your session is not without value and can in fact be very powerful, if you can bear the unbearable. We get to see parts of ourselves of which we were previously unaware, and we can begin to integrate this knowledge. The humbling and humiliation that occur as a result are also valuable. As our practice deepens, we come to see that this can represent an important step. In the spiritual process, nothing can be left out.

Shila and Right Livelihood

A further important area of traditional shila is how one makes one's living. Buddhism talks about "right livelihood," meaning a livelihood that does nothing to harm others and, even better, promotes their welfare. In modern societies, we also and especially have to consider livelihoods that are damaging to ourselves. Both a livelihood that harms others and one that harms oneself are "wrong livelihoods," because both are damaging and disruptive of the journey for ourselves or others.

Right livelihood raises many questions that are perhaps new to Buddhism, because it can be argued that many occupations and ways of making money in modern economies in one way or another expose ourselves and others to degradation, exploitation, and harm. It is a distressing fact of modern life that our institutions, organizations, and businesses too often put corporate needs above those of the individuals who work for them, let alone those of the consumers from whom they profit. Many ways of making a living require too many hours on the job, offer dehumanizing work environments and assignments, make unrealistic work demands, operate via exploitative relationships up and down the chain of command, require labor that is unsafe and undercompensated, and so on.

Those of us who find ourselves in terrible work situations, in which we feel exploited and even harmed, have as a consequence a very difficult time in our personal lives, our relationships, our families, and our spiritual endeavors. We

know all too well how everything is truly interconnected; the spiritual and the quotidian cannot be held apart. If we carry great distress in our daily work life, when we do sit down to meditate, all we can think about is how trapped we feel and that we are dying inside. Our practice is consumed by us desperately looking for a way to extricate ourselves and find a different livelihood, one more aligned with our basic values and aspirations. This can be excruciating, but also has the possibility of becoming a transformative phase of our practice if we stick with it. At other times, the situation is just too painful to face, and so we avoid the meditation cushion altogether. Enormously difficult and frightening as it can be, sometimes the only solution is to change jobs or even occupations.

Establishing an Appropriate Shila Is a Gradual Process

Over time, then, through trial and error, we begin to see how our interactions with our world are inseparable from our meditation practice and in fact have a huge impact on it. If we want to meditate, we are going to have to pay attention to how we are with ourselves (personal shila) and how we are with others (interpersonal shila). Eventually, our practice forces us to become more honest with ourselves; through it we are brought down to the ground of who we really are and how we actually behave. We see that we have to change, both for our own welfare and for that of the others in our life, and the pain of these insights changes us. Here is meditation in its most creative form. Touching back into the basic themes of this book, seeing what needs to change is “what there is to experience” and being willing to make the changes is spontaneous response. “Spontaneous” here means our response is not based on ego strategy or calculation but rather on surrendering into action that is aligned with who we fundamentally are.

There is a process here, and while it is made possible and nourished by our meditation, it cannot be rushed. Initially, we may be oblivious to how we are with ourselves or with others; we may not have much clarity about how distorted our way of interacting is or the extensive impact it has on us and our practice, not to speak of our relationships. Then, in our practice, we do begin to see—in fact, we see too much about ourselves—and we are not just inspired to change, we feel we have to.

So we form resolutions. We make some initial tries and fail miserably. Slowly, we modify our behavior, in small ways at first, perhaps with the help of friends

or a mentor. Eventually, the small behavioral changes begin to take root and become more natural to us, leading to larger ones. And after a while, our feeling and experience in our practice and toward others undergo a shift. The tremendous sense of groundedness that comes along with somatic meditation organically leads us to this place. On the one hand, the shift is experienced as natural, no big deal. But on the other, something *really* is different now in our relational life—it is much more straight on and more satisfying.

In relation to our practice, we find that when we simplify our life and sustain that simplification, our experience of our daily meditation and also of retreat undergoes a very significant transformation. Perhaps in the past there were moments when we found ourselves in a truly open, utterly peaceful, luminous awareness. Now we discover that this incredibly joyful state is far more accessible. More often and for longer periods, we find ourselves in a state of beatitude, yes, but we also see it is a very natural, normal human state, one that was waiting for us all along. The difference can largely be ascribed to our having simplified our life. Our partner, our family, our friends, and our work associates notice we are just being in our active life in a very different way, one that is more simple and perhaps more grounded, clear, and direct.

In relation to other people, the impact of our interpersonal shila is equally telling. We find in ourselves a new forthrightness, an authenticity, a real caring; it may be quite novel or strange to feel so wholesome in relation to others! There arises a genuine inspiration to treat others with respect, and now, because we have changed inside, it is an inspiration we can fulfill in a real way. At the same time, we see the journey toward becoming a fully decent human will take time, but it is, like meditation itself, a worthy endeavor to spend the rest of our life on.

Thus it is that in developing our somatic practice of Pure Awareness, we are establishing a foundation of meditation and meditational awareness that henceforth will be part of our neurological system: the confidence, sensitivity, awareness, and felt sense of connection to our deepest nature are beginning to become just part of who we are. Once that foundation is implanted in us on a neurological and somatic level, then we not only can but *must* turn toward making adjustments in our life, establishing ways of being with ourself and others that are fully aligned with and transparent to the depths of being that now, more and more, we identify with as being who we really are.

Shila in the Modern-Day Context

Discomfort and Internet Distraction

In order to mature spiritually, we need to remain within the integrity and interiority of our human experience. We need to experience what is arising in our life, whether positive, negative, or neutral, without impulsively exiting and running away or trying to manipulate it in any way.

If we do remain within that, something very interesting happens. When fresh experience arises in us—and this is going to happen more and more often through the somatic practice—initially we are at a loss; when we stay within our Soma, we see that preestablished ego strategies are not adequate to it. We see further that to remain within our experience, we have to let go of our urge to manage or control, and we have to surrender to the interior life that is emerging. By staying with its uncertainty and openness, its unfamiliarity and even uncanniness, not giving in to ego frustration, ambition, or fear, we change. We fundamentally transform as human beings. Old patterns dissolve and new, more appropriate and functional ones are able to be born. In our meditation, the strong *interior container* of the Pure Awareness posture gives us a way to do this. In our ordinary life, shila provides the *external container* to enable us to remain within the integrity of our experience; shila sets up a situation that encourages us to avoid exiting into our previous habitual, addictive patterns. We have a helpful sense of what this feels like from our Pure Awareness practice.

Typically, especially in our culture, we don't do that. Most of us believe, perhaps without realizing it, that difficult feelings such as frustration, confusion, anxiety, depression, fear, loneliness, loss, grief—all of which in past cultures were considered normal and accepted parts of being human—must be

eliminated, ignored, or controlled. Quite a few interconnected causes seem to contribute to this belief. For one thing, we are losing our capacity to rest within ourselves; without that ability, we have no interior somatic ground upon which to remain with discomfort, frustration, and pain. Moreover, as many have observed, the range of socially and individually acceptable human feelings and experiences seems to be shrinking, almost year by year.

This is reinforced by the rhetoric of our surrounding culture: “You don’t have to feel bad; it is unsafe and hurtful to experience any kind of psychological pain; there are lots of ways to make yourself feel better. And you should.” For some of us, the answers are drugs, alcohol, eating disorders, compulsive sexual activity, extreme overwork, gambling obsessions—all the things we might identify as pathological. But for the rest of us, we could seek a savior in religion or the perfect therapist; or we resort to other thing equally socially acceptable, such as athletics, fervent socializing, or constant travel. Perhaps the most common example is consumerism: buying merchandise to address difficult feelings such as powerlessness, lack of self-esteem, social insecurity, boredom, or meaninglessness. There is a belief that the answer lies in something outside that we must acquire and take in—the latest electronic device, a computer game, clothing; or a psychology, philosophy, religion; or even a sports team. We hook on to these and develop addictions to them; we find pleasure and reassurance in them; and when we are feeling out of sorts, uncomfortable, or worse, we habitually go back to them to feel better. This is the dictionary definition of addiction.

In some ways most negatively impactful, especially for the meditator, is the rampant and well-documented addictive behavior associated with the Internet and electronic devices. Before the Internet, when we were bored, lonely, or anxious, we might have gone out to the curb to see if the mail carrier had left any good mail; now, we might check for some gratifying or entertaining e-mail dozens of times a day. And in the past there were no phone messages unless a human took one for you. For many of us, using the cyberworld to find pleasant distraction or emotional payoff has become a compulsion. More and more, we feel that we *have* to check our e-mail, monitor the news, order something online, research the internet, and so on. At this point, we have developed a very real addictive pattern in relation to the Internet, one serious enough that it is able to override and derail many of our basic life values and commitments, including our inspiration to meditate. The neurotic gratification of more and more information has replaced the very deep pleasure of genuine understanding and

wisdom without our even noticing.

This is something I have worked with in my own life, especially after a disturbing realization while using the Internet during breaks in a morning of meditation practice. That I was doing so should have been concerning enough on its own; that it wasn't speaks to the normalization of this kind of behavior. To explain: let's say that during the first hour of my morning practice, with my mind initially a little murky and unsettled from the night, I arrive at a place of more peace, openness, and connectedness with my world and my life, a place that might be suffused with happiness just to be alive and able to do the work I am doing. Of course, this doesn't happen every time, but it happens often enough. Then, I take a break. In the past, when I returned to the second part of my session, my awareness would often deepen even further, and I might begin to find fluid vistas opening up that were brand-new and compelling. That was before adding my computer into my break.

Now, after perhaps only ten or fifteen minutes on e-mail and the Internet during my break, I have discovered that when I go back to part two of my morning practice, something very different happens. Every time, my "practice mind" is more or less completely gone. The natural openness of the meditative state, the stillness and inspiration, have been replaced by my small, strategizing, ambitious, defensive ego consciousness. Rather than being settled and present, I am now stirred up and distracted. Any warmth and deep appreciation of emotional connectedness has evaporated; if I am honest, I feel a bit cold, disconnected, and without much feeling life at all. Now I see how my Internet activity can easily turn into a major obstacle to my own meditative journey with my hardly realizing it.

Reading Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* and other similar explorations of the negative impacts of the Internet on our brains, our minds, and our lives, it is clear that what I have been experiencing is not only not unusual but has become quite common for those in our culture who spend a significant amount of time in front of their computers.

Cyberactivity tends to excite the left brain, activate the sympathetic nervous system, and raise the stress hormones. At the same time, not surprisingly, it tends to desensitize and deaden sensation and feeling of the Soma, and it depresses the activity of the right brain, dimming the felt sense of being and the experience of inner space. These effects fuel and exacerbate the disconnection of mind and body. My own experience is that the more time spent on the Internet, the more

the volume of conceptual thinking increases. At a certain point, we might feel there isn't a gap between one thought and the next. This is a vicious cycle, because the more rampant our discursive thinking becomes, the more out of touch with ourselves and anxious we feel; and the more anxious we feel, the more we look to the Internet to allay our anxiety and find that ever-elusive emotional payoff.

Research further suggests that Internet use tends to shrink the scope of conscious awareness, which I have also discovered in my own experience. The smaller one's field of awareness, the more of our experience cannot gain admittance into our consciousness and is pushed back into our Soma, into our body, our unconscious. This tends to promote increased feelings of agitation and stress—hence my loss of the peace and settledness between sessions of practice.

There is also a marked deterioration in our moral or ethical sense. As Nicholas Carr puts it, we are less and less able to see people as actual flesh-and-blood humans who are ends in themselves, with their own irreducible value, who have a reality beyond our conceptual versions of them. Spending so much time with virtual images and ideas of others, we tend to lose our relationship to actual people as anything except our conceptual projection. Our concept of them becomes, for us, the entire reality of who they are. Fake news, where millions of people readily take conceptual fantasies to be reality, would probably not be possible without the changes to our brains brought about by the Internet. Communicating with someone through e-mail or texting just does not provide us with the same experience of full embodiment and otherness as having a living person right in front of you.

In short, we are losing touch with the actual, somatic experience of being human; our lives are being progressively reduced to an isolated, left-brain, conceptualized virtual reality. More and more of us cannot imagine there could be any other "reality." Neurobiologically speaking, we are losing the capacity to feel, sense, intuit, touch, inhabit our actual lives; we are losing touch with the embodied, gritty reality of our person and our world. Yes, we can think with increasing speed, sophistication, and efficiency; yes, we have more information at our fingertips; and yes, we can score higher on "intelligence tests." But the price being paid is incalculable.

Trigger Warnings and Safety Zones

Not unconnected with all of this, I believe, is the increasing intolerance on college campuses for topics, courses, teachers, reading assignments, outside speakers, and events that could possibly be experienced as uncomfortable, worrying, anxiety producing, or in some other way painful. Many of us now, apparently, want to feel safe and to be guaranteed that in any situation we will feel safe. This kind of mass distancing from what in other times and places was considered a normal and healthy part of human life is certainly perplexing and concerning. Why is all of this happening in American culture and elsewhere, just now? And why, especially among young people? This is, obviously, an endlessly complex topic with many factors at play and a great variety of different intelligent and legitimate responses. As a teacher of somatic meditation, however, I want to suggest one critical dynamic that I believe to be at work.

I mentioned above that one of the prices of our increasing modern disembodiment is that we lose our felt sense of being grounded. We no longer feel rooted in our bodies, connected with our feelings, our experience, and our lives, or nourished and supported by the earth. I also said that when we have lost our sense of embodiment in this way, the human feelings and emotions we do have become far more problematic and difficult to handle. As mentioned, absent this kind of grounding, the human ego simply is unable to tolerate, much less manage, a great deal of ordinary human experience. To refer to Jung's observation once again, when you are not grounded in your body, you will simply be unable to tolerate most of the emotional life of being human. Then your only option for survival will be to repress what you feel and then project it outside as a threat to be managed. I think this is what is going on with many of our college-aged students and young adults today and, perhaps to a less visible extent, to all of us.

Our college students of the recent past and the present are the first to have grown up entirely within the all-pervasive influence of the virtual electronic world and to have conducted their social lives within that context. And, in my experience as a university teacher, they are also, in relation to previous generations, the most distant from their raw human experience; they are the most alienated from ordinary feelings and emotions; and they are the most mistrusting of anything painful or distressing that might arise in their lives. The connection is, to me, obvious between living in a world defined largely by the Internet and what some call the "extreme sensitivity" of today's college students. I don't think "sensitivity" quite catches it; I think the problem is extreme disembodiment brought about through lives that are more and more

electronically determined, more virtual, more and more cut off from anything real.

Trigger warnings, the demand for safe zones, and the attempt to control college environments by trying to ban possibly upsetting experiences are all, it seems to me, inevitable given the virtual reality in which these folks have largely grown up.¹ I appreciate the frustrations and fears of modern educators and also their attempts to put the brakes on the growing momentum of student fear and feelings of being unsafe, which threaten to undermine the very world of higher education.

But let's consider who or what is ultimately responsible for this situation. Here, I look to my own generation and those who have come since, who have been so optimistic and avidly in favor of any and all developments electronic and so excited about the possibilities of our increasingly high-tech culture. I look to our ambition, to our avarice, and to our, as it seems to me, willful ignorance of the possible negative impacts on our children. We have not acknowledged the legacy of dehumanization that we have been bequeathing to them. In their demands for trigger warnings and safe zones, they are finally beginning to tell us how terrified they feel, how vulnerable, and how unable to handle their own feelings of being human in this world.

I am mentioning this example because I want to underscore, once again, what is at stake for us as practitioners in the Internet age. While some of us may try to modulate our time on the Internet, I suspect that none of us is really making room to consider the actual extent of the damage our virtual obsessions may be bringing to the human person and, hence, to our lives together in this world. To me, our young people are the canaries in the coal mine. They are showing us what happens when you grow up with the virtual world of the Internet and electronic media as your primary reality and wind up in a state of more or less complete disconnection from your actual experience.

Within this context, somatic meditation does offer one of the few possible remedies to the situation, by showing us a way to return to our body, our experience, and our embodiment and to connect, once again, to a real world and a real life. Our practice of somatic meditation as taught in this book, then, may be of benefit to far more than our individual person and our individual life. It may provide a standpoint and a perspective from which, as our experience matures, we may be able to see the people around us more clearly and with more understanding, and from which we are able to find creative and perhaps novel

ways to help them come back to themselves, their inborn sanity, and their lives. In short, in dealing with our own self-destructive Internet and electronic addictions, perhaps we can position ourselves to help our world.

Our addiction to the Internet is, obviously, just one example of the addictive strategies that are found at every level of modern life and within all of us. Addictive behavior seems to be the way most of us get through our day and get through our life. Addictions, whether to heroin, food, alcohol, shopping, compulsive work, vacationing, sex, violence, the “news,” or the world of the electronic, are so attractive because they enable us to turn away from the inherently problematic nature (from ego’s standpoint) of direct experience and toward something else that is—or at least appears to be—more known, predictable, and soothing.

The more disembodied we become, the more we will rely on our addictive behaviors, whatever they may be; and the more we do this, the more disconnected and disembodied we become. The result is that we become less and less willing or able to deal with our own bodies, our truest feelings, the people we are close to, the actuality of our own lives; and then the more intense the hit we will need from our addictive actions. It is a vicious cycle. As with any of the other addictions that we use as substitutes for actually being alive, our addiction to the Internet needs to be honestly faced; its toxicity needs to be acknowledged and seen clearly; and we need to put in place boundaries, shilas, that limit its negative impacts. If we are serious about our lives, we may need, from time to time, to go cold turkey.

Other Contemporary Challenges

In the Asia of past times, as mentioned, a functional container was provided to the meditator by the rules of the tradition and reinforced by one’s familial, monastic, or hermit community. Much of the protection circle, the shila, needed for practitioners was thus already taken care of and accepted on faith. In many ways, the traditional Asian situation was relatively easy because everything was already set out for you, and social expectations and pressure could reduce the danger of falling into unhelpful behaviors.

At the same time, in that situation there was obviously another kind of danger, that of all organized religion: namely, that the socially sanctioned behavioral prescriptions, the rules, regulations, and expectations, could put people to sleep.

One could all too easily go into cruise control and fall into a pattern of rote compliance. One might fulfill the behavioral norms perfectly but mindlessly, thinking that by “being good” in this way, one was making the journey.

In our meditative journey as modern people, if we do want to take on the traditional codes of shila, we need to be aware that we run the risk of hiding out, of using the codes as a way to feel good about ourselves and avoid the confusion, chaos, and pain that lie right at the heart of authentic spiritual work.

For most of us, however, the path to creating a wholesome container for our practice is ever so much more difficult than in traditional Asia. We will have to discover how we need to be—how to arrive at an appropriate shila—by trying a lot of things, through trial and error and seeing what works. This approach is admittedly more risky, as it shifts primary responsibility away from the authorities, the “big people,” onto us. But as Ringu Tulku Rinpoche once said to me, either you take the chance that mistakes will be made, or you play it safe with the relative certainty that nothing will happen at all.

In the end, for those who are up for it, figuring things out for ourselves, perhaps with similarly minded folks, will be the far more empowering, creative, and spiritually productive choice. In the modern world, then, we will have to arrive at a suitable container by drawing intelligently on the tradition, listening to our mentors, and working collaboratively with other like-minded practitioners. Most of all, we have to look very carefully and honestly at our life and how it interfaces with our meditation. In a way, this is asking a lot, because it means that no part of our life can be sequestered, compartmentalized, and separated off from the spiritual journey. It is a 24/7 project we are engaging in, with no exits, no hiding places, and no excuses.

Step by step, we come to see the importance for our meditative journey of a wholesome and supportive container. We won’t be able to be satisfied just mindlessly running our preexisting spiritual word-processing program; we will have to arrive at the much deeper and fuller understanding that comes from being able to go inside our spiritual computer, see how it works, and modify its operating system to obtain the results we want. Nothing is taken for granted; this is Buddhism from the ground up, from the body up, as it should be.

Shila on a Cosmic Scale

As we work with shila as an essential discipline of our journey, our perspective

gradually widens. There is a process that is unfolding here. In the beginning, we may assume that our meditation is independent of what is going on in our life. Then, over time, we begin to realize that how we handle our life on the outskirts of our practice has a very real impact on what happens when we sit down to meditate.

In this process there is a deepening and extending of our own awareness; we come to see that everything, no matter how seemingly mundane, calls to be done with the same openness, precision, responsibility, and consciousness that up until now we have been developing for the sake of our meditation. But now we begin to see and feel it is not just for the sake of our meditation; it is also for the sake of others. We see that people, for their own sake, also want us to relate to them with these qualities, and when we don't, there is a bad feeling, however subtle, between us. We think, "Wow! That's a discovery."

But perhaps it is not just people who want to be related to in the right way. In fact, it may be that everything in life, even the most apparently random and trivial detail, calls us out in the same manner. Perhaps a good analogy is the way parents often feel when holding their newborn child. They will say, "My baby has a claim on me. I can't rationalize it; I can't entirely understand it; it is just in my heart and my body." They often experience this claim as absolute; in the face of the sacredness and the deep connectedness they feel, there are no questions and no hesitation. It is like that for us as meditators. Increasingly, it dawns on us that everything in life has its own value, its own reason for being, its own right to be, if you will, and its own claim on us. We are increasingly called to pay attention to that, respect it, discover our connection with it, and act in alignment. And then the bottom drops out of our practice, the roof blows off, and the walls collapse. Because of the impeccability and universality of our shila, we are, for a moment, one with the immeasurable expanse.

Shila and Individuality

In the end, a major and particularly thorny problem with the one-size-fits-all approach of Asian shilas is one that even today is barely discussed. The traditional Asian approach often reflects a deep and all-pervasive orientation of agriculture-based societies and their religions. In the early agrarian societies of ten to five thousand years ago, and after, people increasingly came to be understood and valued in terms of their places within the larger, increasingly

organized, complex, centralized, hierarchical agrarian social matrix. In these societies, characteristically, individuality was not a highly prized value. We see this devaluation of individuality in traditional Buddhist and specifically Tibetan Buddhist societies.

By “individuality,” I do not mean the “individualism” that is rampant today, the contemporary ideology of narcissistic disconnection, self-absorption, and disregard of others. In contrast, I mean each individual’s “personhood,” if you will—the ultimately unique reality of each individual human life. As the more extraneous, conceptualized patterns of our “individualism” are stripped away on the meditative cushion, this individuality gradually bubbles to the surface and manifests, leaving the naked person underneath that we actually are, the person that has been, is, and always will be known to the Soma. It is the person, in all his or her irreplaceable and incomparable beauty, that our Soma never stops wanting us to be and is always urging us forward to become.

As the journey makes clear, this unprecedented person nevertheless shares things with others of our species: a fundamental openness of mind; a sense of deep connection, tenderness, and responsibility in relation to others; and a feeling of the sacredness of our person, our life, and the universe we live in. Most of all, there is a deeply rooted felt sense of the unique journey that is ours to make. So it is not just our cultural situation that requires us to look freshly and without preconceptions at the challenge of shila. This is also demanded by the particular spiritual imperative of modern people: that of uncovering and living fully—not just with our meditation practice but with our entire life—this never-to-be-repeated event in the universe that is us. I know from many Asian students in our lineage that people in Asia (especially, though not only, the young) feel deeply in this same way. And they have come to the somatic practice because often the collective expectations of their natal cultures get in the way of what they feel they must do to take up the challenge of discovering their true person and life.

Buddhism is frequently said to be a way of life, and I think this strikes right to the heart of the matter. It teaches *a way* to go about living. At the center of this way is the practice of meditation, as the method that perhaps more than any other opens us fully to our own being and what it wants from us. Buddhism at its best, even while stressing meditation, does not tell us what that way or method is going to lead us to. Answers from other times and places—and from other people—are not going to be our answers; as Buddhists of the practicing lineage have always done, we have to find our own.

PART SIX

Everyday Awakening

Complete Openness and “Something to Experience” in Practice and Daily Life

IN THE BEGINNING OF THIS book, I described the three dimensions or aspects of Pure Awareness as understood in the Vajrayana: complete openness, “something to experience,” and free or spontaneous response. Let us look again at these three aspects, but in a more concrete way in terms of how they show up in our meditation practice and our daily life. In this chapter, I would like to consider the first two aspects, complete openness and “something to experience.” As we have seen, these two are developed primarily in our meditation, but then they begin to permeate our life outside of meditation. In the next chapter, we will look in some detail at spontaneous response. This third aspect is a distinctive quality of Pure Awareness because, while inseparable from the other two in meditative awareness, it quickly opens out into the rest of our life. In fact, it provides the much-needed bridge between the meditative state itself and our ordinary, everyday human existence.

Complete Openness

To recap, complete openness means that, experientially, we can find no walls, boundaries, or limitations to our awareness. We also see for ourselves that this fathomless awareness cannot be compromised by anything: everything we experience resides in a space of complete accommodation and unconditional acceptance. The openness is so thorough that there is no standpoint from which anything could ever be judged or excluded. Moreover, as we have seen, the space is so immaculate and vast that there is not even a “watcher”; and with no “center” to awareness, there can be no fringe, no periphery, just the

immeasurable expanse of awareness itself.

This is a perfect and thorough openness at once of our mind, our body, our awareness—for at this point such distinctions do not apply; these are all the self-same thing. In complete openness we see and touch and taste what is ultimate in our human state of being. When we see that we recognize ourselves at the most profound level as open space, open awareness that is empty, immaculate, unimpeded, that goes on forever. The somatic feeling of this boundless openness is like a rush of freedom going out and out and out, opening, emptying, releasing into the infinite. To come into contact with this dimension of our being is a deeply and joyfully *felt* experience.

Buddhism calls this the realization of Dharmakaya, “the body of ultimate reality,” the basic nature not only of ourselves but of everything. According to Buddhism, in this experience we find what we have always been seeking: final freedom and fulfillment. To put it otherwise, the realization of Dharmakaya finally and definitively resolves all of our problems and our pains. Whatever else happens—and we have two more aspects of Pure Awareness to go—it will be nothing but a natural outflow of the complete openness as further dimensions of Dharmakaya.

From the ego’s point of view, how can it possibly be that we are ultimately nothing but fundamental openness and its outflows? The ego is solid, the ego is real, the ego is a reliable reference point, right? However, from the standpoint of our own deeper nature, how could we ever possibly have thought that who we fundamentally are was anything other than the pure experience of freedom? How could we possibly have fallen into thinking that we are a solid thing that can be ascertained by the thinking mind, labeled, pinned down, and objectified?

As I have been saying and hoping to have helped you feel, complete openness is a direct, personal, immediate, deeply felt human experience. And while it is always itself and never undergoes alteration, no matter what, it does change us deeply, from the bottom up, so to speak. When you really experience that you have always been abiding in a state of purity, freedom, and perfection, there is possible a profound release, a letting go of the burden of having to be and maintain a “self.” Up until now, none of our efforts—even our loves and aspirations, our inspirations and creativity—have ever been free of our problem of having a “me” we have to constantly relate to and look after. That ego has always been right on center court or hovering in the shadows ready to jump back into the game at the first opportunity. But with the experience of complete

openness, it truly is “game over.”

Now, as I’ve been saying, we are not only fundamentally and essentially free, but we are liberated to relate to everything we are and our entire life without obstruction. We were born to fly, and now we find ourselves in vast space, exploring to our heart’s content every corner of being that calls us. Of course, there is a journey unfolding here. In the first glimpse of the awakened state, we are visiting that country for the first time; it does not mean that we can instantly relocate and live there forever. But when we have seen that fabulous place and known it as a direct somatic experience, it shifts our sense of what is possible for us. All you need is one authentic glimpse, and you are likely to go back to the drawing board to see how you might rearrange your life so this can be not only your main thing but, in a certain sense, your only thing. And, as we have seen, the lineage of Pure Awareness shows us in practical and concrete ways how to bring this about.

“Something to Experience”

The immeasurable expanse of the Dharmakaya, that endless, immaculate, joyful vista, is not devoid or vacant. In fact, its space is alive. And that aliveness is also a deeply and somatically felt experience. In traditional Buddhism, as mentioned earlier, that aliveness is called the Sambhogakaya, “the Body of Great Joy.” We have talked about that aliveness as a “something to experience.” From one point of view, we could say that this is the “content” of Dharmakaya; it is what we experience about Dharmakaya, tangibly. But, as we’ve seen, this “content” is not anything that can be objectified. It cannot be labeled, categorized, linked with any thought, or located on any map. It is ineffable: inexpressible, unutterable, beyond mind.

How do we express that it is outside and independent of our thinking mind, which can only understand anything by using labels, categories, and reference points? To review, the tradition attempts to suggest this by putting forward nonsubstantializing language. Thus “something to experience” is sometimes called “the energy of awareness.” This refers to our actual experience: when we are resting in Pure Awareness, the world does show up, but not as anything familiar, anything we already know. Rather, it shows up as what is called “pure experience,” our naked, unadorned, unprocessed experience that is not linked to the framework of our thinking mind. It is the life, the potency, the energy of

awareness.

As we've also seen, this pure experience is also called "the radiance," or "the luminosity," of Pure Awareness. Of course, we could ask, "How does that work? In what way can energy or radiance or luminosity be something we could experience?" As mentioned previously, a famous analogy says that "something to experience" is like what happens when sunlight streams through empty space. We look into that space, and while we do not see any "thing," nevertheless the space itself is alive and luminescent, somehow intensely bright. In our practice, at some point we will begin to see just how the "something to experience" is not in any way an object within space or somehow distinct from space, but merely the way we are experiencing that space. These kinds of terms and analogies help disabuse us of the notion that there is actually anything there, as an object, that we can hold on to or mentally identify in any way.

Now we come to a critical and somewhat enigmatic point: when abiding inseparable from Pure Awareness, we do apperceive something or other. In a certain sense, what we see are the very same things we might see when we look from an ego standpoint out onto the world—except there is a critical difference. We just see what is given to perception, hence the term "pure perception," or "bare perception," that is applied to this kind of seeing. It is first-order seeing; there are no mental overlays. This means that you perceive, but you literally do not know, cognitively, what you are looking at. There is no sense at all of recognizing, "Oh, that is a tree, that is a butterfly, that is an airplane overhead or a lawnmower running next door." We simply are not putting the familiarizing labels on anything. That kind of second step in perception, the step of putting a label on it and "recognizing" it, is completely absent.

And that dramatically changes the nature and quality of our perception. When we do not go to that second step, the nature, quality, scope, and magnitude of our perception open up enormously. Without the mental overlay, what we behold of the world is astoundingly, shockingly much more vivid, bright, and precise, filled with unutterable beauty, and just itself.

Let me try to illustrate this with a mundane example. When I started doing Pure Awareness practice in solitary retreat as my principal meditation, I would, as is my custom when in retreat, take walks up in the mountains every day. At a certain point I noticed something rather startling as an outflow of my practice. When I was thinking in my ordinary way, my visual perceptions were pretty much as usual, nothing special. Then one day I was startled to find that when I

was hiking along, when I returned to Pure Awareness, quite abruptly it was as if a veil had suddenly fallen away from my eyes. There was the same mountain forest that I have known for years. But in another way, it wasn't the same mountain forest at all, because now the experience, my perception of the forest, was entirely different.

How can I describe this? The forest I now beheld was starkly displayed before my eyes: bright, vivid, awash in colors that were intensely alive and luminous. And most of all, the forest revealed just then seemed astoundingly *real*. The forest I had been walking in all these years was not actually the real forest. Now it seemed like a dream. So *this* was the real forest!

Another aspect to this “something to experience” that I now noticed was that there were no time coordinates: there was no sense of past, present, and future. This forest terrain was just abiding in its own ultimacy, the sheer beingness of itself. So there was a sense of this revelation occurring outside of my usual temporal scheme. In Tibetan tradition, this is called “the fourth moment,” not past, present, or future, but a different kind of time altogether. Or, actually, it is no time. The sheer experiential impact of beholding the world in this way is profound; one feels that, in a way, one is touching eternity. And it was not what one might have thought—that to directly perceive some relative phenomenon without any conceptual framework is to experience its timeless, eternal aspect.

In this perception, there were also, strangely, no spatial reference points either. The trail I typically follow, up to a place high above my cabin, has twelve switchbacks. What I have come to realize is that when I am hiking along and in my thinking mind, without realizing it, I always have the map of the twelve switchbacks right there, in my consciousness. Also in my consciousness is me, exactly where I am on that map: how far I have come, which switchback I am walking on right now, where I am on it, and how much further I have to go. I am constantly orienting myself on the map, conceptually, in the space.

However, when not separate from Pure Awareness, I notice something entirely different. The exact location I am in is much, much more vivid. One sees, as I am saying, everything with a sharpness, a precision, a vibrancy of form and color that is startling and arresting. But—and this is my point—I *do not know where I am on the map*. In that moment, which can be quite sustained, the map and where I am on it simply do not exist. I am seeing only that “something to experience,” which has always been waiting for me beyond the haze and din of my ego's GPS. Of course, I can come back into my thinking mind any time I

want, but sometimes I wonder, why would I want to? When, inevitably, I do, then at least I realize what I have lost and what is out there, waiting.

You can explore this boundary: rest in Pure Awareness; be entirely present, perceptually, to your immediate field of experience; then deliberately exit into your thinking mind and see how your pure perception instantly shuts down; then return again to Pure Awareness. The contrast is extraordinarily striking and gives you a lot to ponder about yourself, what is important to you, and how you actually want to live your life.

There is a saying in Tibetan Buddhism that is relevant here: “Seeing nothing (no-thing) is the supreme sight,” meaning that when we see without separating, without “recognizing,” labeling, and conceptualizing something as an objectified other “thing,” then that is the supreme sight, that is seeing things in their ultimate, true aspect.

Within “something to experience,” as already suggested, there is a quality of sacred revelation, if you will. When I perceived the mountain forest in its own being, outside of temporal and spatial coordinates, there was a sense of seeing something about it that was final and definitive. The experiential quality right then was that these simple realities were fully and completely given in the revelation of this moment: in the looming presence of this rock; this ancient, aware, wizened tree; this lush ground cover with its tiny, fragile white flowers; each strange bird; each miraculous butterfly; each darting chipmunk; each snake far more curiously aware of *me* than I would have expected; whatever other unique and surprising creature that might happen along; this trail winding up and up, filled with the significance of the human journey itself; this mountain slope falling drastically away below; the neighboring mountains to my left, jagged, frightening, primal, rising high above. The feeling was that there was nothing behind the appearance, nothing left to find out, nothing being concealed, nothing left over or incomplete. Everything was fully revealed, completely open, transparent, right here. What a contrast to our usual tied and tangled, mentally mediated perceptions, in which we are always feeling our experience is somehow incomplete, that we are never seeing the real thing.

Also unexpected, in this moment of “something to experience,” there was the perception of a striking coherence to the visual field. On the one hand, each pebble, each rock, each tree stood forth in precise, vivid detail as just itself in all the fullness of its individual being. But at the same time, everything was not only in intimate interrelation with everything else; more than this, it was clearly

revealed as part of a coherent and, indeed, immensely beautiful tapestry, each thing offering its particular line and texture and color to the harmonious whole.

These aspects of “something to experience” are, not surprisingly, talked about in the Pure Awareness traditions. Trungpa Rinpoche, for example:

*All aspects of every phenomenon are completely clear and lucid. The whole universe is open and unobstructed, everything mutually interpenetrating....All phenomena are completely new and fresh, absolutely unique at the instant of their appearance and entirely free from all concepts of past, present, and future, as if experienced in another dimension of time.*¹

A striking feature of “something to experience” is its evident sacredness and perfection. In beholding the mountain landscape, not only is everything open, fully given, and real, but one senses the utter purity and perfection of what is revealed. There is a sense that everything is just as it is meant to be, that right here each phenomenon’s own destiny is completely fulfilled. Trungpa Rinpoche:

*Everything is naturally perfect just as it is, completely pure and undefiled. All phenomena naturally appear in their uniquely correct modes and situations.*²

One of most important aspects of “something to experience” is the implicit portentousness of phenomena, the sense that they are charged with profound import and implication. Beholding the forest landscape, with day fading and heavy clouds brooding over the scene, I felt, within the very perception itself, something deeply significant and filled with meaning, though not a meaning I could put into words. And somehow, mysteriously, to perceive this charged and abundant significance felt so nourishing and fulfilling. No need for any superimposed interpretations, any attributed significance. No need to seek for meaning outside of experience. Phenomena in and of themselves holding such great portent and such great meaning! Again, Trungpa Rinpoche points to

*all phenomena...forming ever-changing patterns full of meaning and significance, like participants in a great dance. Everything is symbol, yet there is no difference between the symbol and the truth symbolized.*³

This “something to experience” can be so overwhelmingly real and filled with value and significance that you feel that you must do something about it. There is an imperative from deep within us, from our deepest nature: *this must be expressed*. When, from this perspective, you view the works of the great visual artists—painters, sculptors, graphic artists, photographers, and so on—you see right away what they are getting at. I grant you that generally you do have to see

the original works—in the case of painting, for example, the density of the paint, the energy of the brushstrokes, the precise luminosity of the colors, their play with one another, the exact quality of the light almost as an independent entity in the painting, the being of the painter so tangibly *there*. When you do, there isn't much doubt: they have seen the world as it truly is, with its light, its energy, its colors, its ever-playing shapes. And knowing that the rest of us do *not* see the world that way, they desperately want to show us, to help us see how the perceptual world is a huge, unprecedented feast of universal joy. The passion and sometimes recklessness of the great artists are not, I think, essentially personality traits. I sense they are a result of what they have seen about the world: that it is immensely beautiful, meaningful, and sacred. These are qualities of their perception. They have seen that “something to experience.”

I mentioned that perceiving this “something to experience” is a deeply felt somatic experience. When we are abiding in Pure Awareness and beholding the world as it actually is beyond thought, we are perceiving something that is truly fresh, alive, new, without precedent, and immensely beautiful, as if it had just been born from the hand of the creator. We feel that life and that density of being reverberating in our bodies.

Here the Buddhist term “Sambhogakaya,” or “body of complete enjoyment,” becomes relevant and clarifying. When we are abiding in Pure Awareness, our perceptions of “something to experience” become enormously somatically pleasurable and even joyful. For example, if we are meditating out of doors and allow the visual expanse to arrive and land, unfiltered, within our awareness, the perception itself is deeply enjoyable. Or, again, if we are sitting within our awareness in a meditation hall and someone is walking across the floor, stirring the space, our body thrills at the sight. Or, finally, when we are meditating, suppose somebody is running a lawn mower next door. From ego's standpoint, with its concepts and preconceptions about the practice and what we want to accomplish, that deafening sound can be felt as a highly irritating, unwanted distraction, and we can have all kinds of triggered emotions, such as frustration, anger, disappointment, even rage. However, resting in Pure Awareness, the lawn mower's roar—absent any conceptualizing—can arrive in our body as something intensely blissful, the energy of being expressing itself out of eternal silence and emptiness.

In the past, when I have gotten stuck in reaction to something like the lawn mower's sound, I have used an astronomical image: I imagine the sound of the lawn mower as the energy of a rapidly spinning neutron star, a pulsar. These

stars have so much energy that, in spite of their enormous size, they can make hundreds of revolutions in just one second. I imagine all of that energy, that “sound,” is the neutron star expressing the joy of being in the midst of the silent, empty, endless reaches of space. This trick, if you will, enables my thinking mind to go completely off-line and my awareness to become available to the “something to experience.” For indeed, the lawn mower’s sound, its energy, is no different in essence from what is going on with the neutron star: energy in space. I just wasn’t open to it because of what I was thinking.

When we do actually perceive the particular “something to experience” that is waiting for us beyond our thinking mind, there is in us a feeling of utter fulfillment and completion. We do indeed feel that the universe is disclosing its full reality to us and that our entire past has been for nothing other than the revelation that lies displayed before us right now, in this transcendent moment.

Freely or Spontaneously Responsive

What Is Spontaneous Response?

The third aspect of Pure Awareness is the tendency toward free or spontaneous response. Spontaneous response is not fundamentally something we actively and intentionally do; rather, like complete openness and “something to experience,” it is an inborn, essential part of Pure Awareness itself. However, this aspect of Pure Awareness has a unique role to play: it is the natural link between the quiescent meditative state itself and the way we go about our life.

As I have noted, the awakened state is not static; it is intensely dynamic, and we see this in the energy, the luminosity of “something to experience.” In fact, although in its Dharmakaya essence it is beyond change or alteration, in the immense field of its intense energy, already there is constant dance and movement. At a certain point, that enormous—from our point of view, chaotic—welter of “something to experience” begins to coalesce in a certain direction, and this is spontaneous response. All of this is happening within the integrity of Pure Awareness itself.

So how does spontaneous response function as a bridge between the meditative state and our ordinary human existence in the world? Again, as we have seen, the entire practice of Pure Awareness involves making our conscious mind, our ego state, more and more transparent to the awakened state and more and more aligned with it. Our practice has no other aim. In complete openness we work to shed all the conceptual apparatus, all the mental baggage, that compromises the open, empty field. In “something to experience,” we receive the full revelation of the ineffable, inconceivable panorama of pure experience, laid out before us. So far we are within the meditative state.

Spontaneous response takes us a step further toward fully embodying our realization. Here the alignment with the awakened state that is required is this: to allow our ego to be aligned with the responsiveness appearing as a spontaneous expression of Pure Awareness. To put it bluntly, we are called by Pure Awareness itself to make our ordinary life, our behavior, our speech, even how we think about things, fully and completely transparent to the awakened state. This means everything we think, say, and do needs to express the full measure of our practice and realization of Pure Awareness. We need, in short, to walk the talk. Otherwise all our practice and understanding aren't going to mean much and aren't going to help other people very much either.

How does this occur? First, there is the natural movement arising within awareness itself; the imperative to responsiveness just happens, and we become aware of that. Second, we—the self-conscious ego person—need to see, acknowledge, and commit to what we have just spontaneously been shown. So now our ego needs to give up its apparently independent, deliberate agency: it must simply render itself, its agendas and plans and actions, in full service of that nonegoic movement of awareness.

On the ego's part, there must be no hesitation or calculation, no doubt or self-protection. It must just follow orders—follow the “command,” as the tradition puts it—inherent in our own unborn awareness. This is what Trungpa Rinpoche called “choicelessness.” The only real choice, as mentioned, is whether we go along with the imperatives arising within awareness—whether we surrender and obey—or whether we hang out in our narcissistic bubble and stubbornly resist. If we refuse to give in, we set up a great struggle between our ego and what, within the integrity of our own basic being, we are being asked to do and what we really need to be doing.

We have already seen a most important example of spontaneous responsiveness, namely, in our discussion of shila. Recall that I kept encouraging you to take your own ego preconceptions and agendas out of the mix and see what your awareness spontaneously wanted from you in your practice. I was saying, “We need to arrive at a way of living that makes room for, does not impede, and furthers our meditative journey.” Put another way, I was asking you to bring your life into alignment with your meditative awareness and what its free or spontaneous responsiveness wanted from you. In other words, check in with your meditative awareness to see whether what you are doing is serving or detracting from your practice of Pure Awareness.

The spontaneous response in our discussion of shila had the two critical elements mentioned above. First, within the meditative state of Pure Awareness, we see reflected as if in a mirror whether some behavior of ours is really aligned with our journey. Given our longing for our own basic being, our intense yearning for it to be open, empty, and free, any perceived ill alignment naturally—freely and spontaneously—cries out to be addressed. This is extraordinarily painful to tolerate. Second, this natural responsiveness gains further traction in that we see we need to sign on and commit to the direction that has spontaneously been shown to us. In other words, the ego's job now is to align itself with that spontaneous imperative, to remain connected, and purely so, to the awakened state within.

And this is the really difficult part for all of us. It is one thing to cultivate a deep and abiding meditative awareness within, but it is quite another to bring our ordinary life, with all of our habitual patterns, into alignment with that. Each of us has built up a life in which our habitual way of acting was designed to bring security, comfort, and some measure of gratification within acceptable bounds. But, as we've seen, in the process we have also built up a kind of prison for ourselves, one in which we do not experience our full depths nor the limitless possibilities of our own existence.

What is inevitably going to happen within the meditative state—and this is an aspect of spontaneous response—is that we will begin to see and feel most uncomfortably all the ill-fitting, misaligned, ultimately self-defeating things we do, all the ways we hide from, push away, and try to evade our own fathomless being. These life-denying ways feel, in our bodies, like a suit of armor that is way too small, that really hurts us, and that gets between us and the free enjoyment of existence we sense is waiting just beyond. This is spontaneous response.

So spontaneous responsiveness is going to require that we continually let go of old patterns and ways, sometimes including relationships, friends, locales, jobs, lifestyles, diversions, and, most importantly, how we think about ourselves. We have to give in to what we are seeing, feel more naked and vulnerable by far than is comfortable, and move on into the unknown, mysterious future of where our life wants to go. This is often very difficult and challenging, and painful, and sometimes fear inducing; but, in another way, inspiring, refreshing, and even exhilarating.

The Three Samayas

There is an important teaching in the Tibetan lineages of Pure Awareness that simply, precisely, and beautifully addresses the need for spontaneous response in our practice and our life. This is the teaching on the three *samayas*, and I would like to share that with you now.

“Samaya” is a Sanskrit term made up of a verbal prefix, *sam*, “together,” and *aya*, derived from the verbal root *i*, “to come or go.” Taken as a whole, “samaya” means literally “coming together” or “meeting.” My preferred translation is “connection,” for reasons presently to be explained.

As we have seen, our self-conscious ego’s problem is that it lives in a state of perpetual disconnection from the Pure Awareness that is our essential self. We have lost our connection with what is most real and true about us. In our practice, the more we become cognizant of this disconnection, the more we feel urgently called to reconnect and to remain in connection. This call that we feel so very deeply within is spontaneous response. It is the spontaneous response of Pure Awareness itself to the perception that we have lost the freedom and the life for which we so deeply long.

In the meditative journey, we begin by making contact; then we ascertain just how much this previously invisible nature means to us and how much we want to deepen our relation. Next, we take up the practice, and we work with the obstacles and the resistance that inevitably come up; and the journey unfolds from there. In our discussion of shila, as mentioned, we saw how impactful, indeed essential, is our own responsiveness; and we saw how when the response is spontaneous—that is, not driven by ego agendas and anxieties—it acts as a critical aspect and support of our practice.

Pure Awareness is not satisfied with us arranging our life so that our meditation practice can flourish. Rather, it calls us to remain in connection with “the natural state” throughout our life; and we feel this more and more intensely as we go along in our journey. This begs the question: How might my entire life be able to come into alignment with the awakened state? The three samayas provide the answer. They show us how to connect with our Pure Awareness throughout our life; how to stay in connection with that basic nature; and how to continually deepen and fuel that connection. “Samaya” means, then, to be in unbroken connection with the Pure Awareness within. The three samayas are going to provide us with specific, concrete guidelines about how to do that.

The three samayas are three *commitments* we need to make. In the chapters on shila, we saw that our own commitment is critical to making our aspirations in relation to practice real. And so it is with the three samayas: we need to commit to the practices that will enable us to stay in connection with the awakened state no matter what happens.

Each of the three samaya commitments addresses one of the three qualities of Pure Awareness. The first samaya addresses how to bring complete openness fully into our life and how to align ourselves with it. The second samaya addresses aligning ourselves fully with “something to experience.” And the third samaya speaks to our need to bring the specific activities of our life into that same alignment in accordance with spontaneous response. Let us consider each of these in order.

The first samaya: I commit today and for each of the remaining days of my life to take refuge in the samaya of the natural state. I commit to hold to my awakened nature. I commit to seek every opportunity to connect with it, develop it, and deepen my relationship with it; I aspire to live my life from the depths of Pure Awareness. If I find myself departing into discursive thought, I will immediately remember and come back to my Soma, and rest in the inconceivable space of my own true nature.

So this first samaya is not just talking about when we are meditating; it is about our entire life as the arena of practice. The reference to “taking refuge” is, of course, recalling the three traditional Buddhist refuges, or the three jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, where we go to seek a safe harbor in the stormy chaos of life. However, here we are committing to seek that protection in the depths of our own nature, in the complete openness of Pure Awareness. In this first samaya, we are asked to remember and connect with Pure Awareness no matter where we are or what we are doing.

The key point is to recognize when we have been hijacked from our own complete openness and have exited into our thinking mind. We need to be on the lookout for this departure throughout our daily life. Initially we may feel that this is asking too much, that we won’t be able to have that awareness, especially in the midst of ordinary life activities.

However—and I think you will find this rather quickly—our daily meditation practice of Pure Awareness is changing the scope, precision, and clarity of our awareness, whether on the cushion or in life. Beyond this, our sitting practice acts like priming the pump: it instigates flashes of awareness when we are not sitting that abruptly show us exactly what we are doing, how we have departed.

Again, this happens automatically; we don't have to do anything except see, acknowledge, and come back to our Soma and its interior field.

To recap our earlier discussion, there are two ways in which this return could happen. First, there may be an abrupt occurrence, something jolting or shocking that stops our thinking mind on the spot and leaves us in fathomless space. At that moment, we are simply already within Pure Awareness. Examples would be when we nearly have a traffic accident, when we have some expectation suddenly shattered, when we are given bad news of some kind. There is a shock, our thinking mind is momentarily stunned, and there we are in the space of the basic nature. Most people, when this kind of abrupt shock happens, become terrified at the loss of "me," and they quickly reconfigure and reestablish their ego narrative. But for the somatic meditator, such moments are taken as a welcome opportunity, for then we can just open and let go into that vast space, rest, and luxuriate in the freedom and limitless vistas for as long as that timeless moment sustains itself.

Second, and more frequently and ordinarily, we abruptly notice that we have exited from our Soma into thinking. We find ourselves thinking, thinking, thinking. And that insight, in and of itself, provides the path back into the unconditioned awareness.

Committing ourselves to this first samaya creates the ground for an ongoing vigilance as we go about our day. This is not a forced or unnatural kind of attentiveness, but rather a question mark that hangs gently, perhaps humorously, over our heads. It is in the background, just asking, "Where am I now?" "Am I here?" "Am I connected with my Soma right now?"

When we do find ourselves lost, we will sense our disconnection and dissociation as suddenly unpleasant or really painful, depending on how sensitive we are. A million different things can hijack our awareness. Perhaps somebody we dislike or don't trust has entered the room. Perhaps while we are driving the traffic makes us suddenly irritable. Perhaps our new baby has woken up crying for the fourth time tonight. It could be anything. But when we notice our departure, we breathe and come back into our Soma and settle into complete openness and make a fresh start from there.

This first samaya provides an extraordinarily powerful tool with which to work in a present, confident, vigorous, and creative way with virtually any situation that comes up in our life that tries to lure us back into our self-defeating habitual responses. The first samaya is the most important one and provides the

ground for the next two.

The second samaya: I commit today and for each of the remaining days of my life to take refuge in the samaya of “something to experience,” the ineffable, sacred world of direct experience. I vow to maintain sacred outlook, to regard all the experiences that occur in my life—the situations, emotions, and the people—as utterly pure and beyond thought. If I find myself departing into doubt, judgment, or rejection, I will immediately remember and come back to my Soma, and rest in the unfathomable sacredness of what is occurring.

The problem being addressed in the second samaya is our ingrained, incorrigible tendency to retreat from virtually everything we experience; it is our habitual withdrawal from the immediacy and sacredness of what is occurring, from the “something to experience.” We depart into labeling, pigeonholing, trying to put things into convenient little conceptual boxes. Why do we so readily vacate the realm of pure experience—which, in a sense, we deeply long for? Why do we reject the energy, color, abundance, and limitless life of naked experience? Recall how our ego operates: experience as it naturally arises for us in the first instant is boundless, infinite in William Blake’s rendering; that terrifies our security-loving, familiarity-seeking ego mind. So this samaya says that when we find ourselves suddenly absent from our life in that way, we will immediately come back to the vastness of Soma and be with the open, boundless, ineffable energy of awareness.

But how do we catch ourselves? How do we realize we have just departed? Again, the tradition provides some specific suggestions. First, there is the somatic feel of having just departed from what is going on. We can feel that suddenly we are not there. I think all of us as humans do sense when we have opted out and exited, but generally we don’t see or acknowledge it because we are so wrapped up in flight from what is before us. However, as in the case of the first samaya, through our practice we are, by default, becoming much more sensitive to our bodies; we are becoming aware, eventually down to a highly refined level, of what we are sensing and feeling. Being connected feels one way: aligned, entrained, and deeply nourished by what is occurring. Being disconnected feels entirely different and, actually, terrible: small, constructed, arid, lifeless, and really quite ghastly. Additionally, in disconnection, we will find ourselves doubting what is going on, applying judgments to it, even rejecting it entirely. These are all indicators that we have abandoned sacred outlook.

Once we have committed to the first samaya and have developed the intention and familiarity of coming back to our complete openness when we find

ourselves lost, fulfilling the second samaya becomes quite natural. Having returned to the complete openness, then the “something to experience” is right there before us, and we need to just lean slightly into it. However, without the ground of the first samaya, fulfilling the second is not possible. If we remain in our head, so to speak, then returning to the sacred world of the second samaya is most likely going to be just an idea.

I want to underscore how challenging this second samaya can be. As we become more aware, we see that we are always judging everything that appears in our life. We judge every emotion, every situation, every person. We judge every thought and feeling that goes through us. It doesn't matter whether these judgments are negative or positive; either way, they represent reducing the unknown, mysterious quality of living to a (mentally) “known” quantity. Most of the time, we will be noticing when we are responding negatively to something. The more intense our own negativity toward what is occurring, the less we are going to want to just be with that most unpleasant or threatening thing. This is a real challenge: it is here that we find out whether we, as practitioners, are for real. We may be fine in the boundless space of our own true nature but not fine at all when we are asked to be with situations, emotions, or people who displease, threaten, or disgust us, or with part of ourselves we can't stand. At that point, the instruction is nevertheless to let go of our self-defensive, judgmental, negative assessment and just open, in a naked and undefended way, to what is right there before us.

The third samaya: I commit today and for each of the remaining days of my life to take refuge in the samaya of great compassion. I vow to make my life transparent to the awakened state, to Pure Awareness, so that everything I do reflects its depth, wisdom, and unconditional love. If I find myself departing into actions that reflect hesitation, confusion, aggression, or doubt, I will, again and again, return to the natural state, bringing all the activities of my life into alignment and entrainment with my own deepest being.

The commitment of the third samaya calls us to look at everything we do in our life and ask ourselves: does this reflect the unconditional openness of the basic state and a respect that sees everything that occurs as sacred? This is slightly different from the first and second samayas. In the first samaya, our focus is strictly on complete openness; when we depart, we just come back into that vast space. In the second samaya, the focus is on being present to whatever has arisen, whatever has occurred. In the second samaya, we are seeking to develop an attitude of acceptance and openness to all the situations, emotions, and people we encounter in life, regarding them as pure and sacred. Both of

these first two samayas, then, tend to reflect qualities of Pure Awareness related to the meditative state.

In the third samaya, however, we need to take the first two samayas as our ground, reference point, and mirror, and then look carefully at our life in a curious, active, inquisitive—and impersonal—way. We want to see, point by point, item by item, whether it does or does not reflect the realization of Pure Awareness. I think for me, and most likely for all of us, there are going to be a lot of ignored, untended, dark places. So here, in the third samaya, you are not waiting for things to come up. Rather, you are taking on your entire life, owning it consciously and deliberately, and working to make it an expression—loving, confident, and joyful—of the awakened state.

Once we do take ownership of our entire life, all the light and shadows, as the appropriate and necessary arena for our spiritual practice, we may find that meditation is not enough. For me and for many of us, just simply doing more practice can leave untouched and untransformed some dark and dysfunctional places, especially in the area of relationship and the developmental tasks of becoming emotionally whole. When any of us run into these areas—and typically they are associated with unconscious traumas that we cannot get to in order to address—as mentioned, outside help is not only okay, it is advised. When I first began meditating, my teachers told me, “Meditation is enough; it can take care of everything.” I myself repeated this opinion for decades. While this may have been true in Tibet, where people led less complicated lives and could spend a lifetime in retreat, I have found that, for myself and for the people I work with in the modern world, from time to time we do need outside wise and experienced help from spiritual friends, advisors, mentors, or teachers, or from healers, therapists, or other trained folks.

This seems just part of fulfilling the third samaya. Nothing can be left out of our journey to the awakened state; the need for transparency is absolute. To fulfill our commitment to awakening, we must mobilize all the resources at our disposal.

Allowing everything in our life—all our words, deeds, and even our thoughts—to be under the obligation to be transparent to Pure Awareness sounds like a tall order, and it is a tall order. But the more our practice deepens and matures, when we find one thing on our meditation cushion—openness, freedom, delight in the chaotic welter of experience—it just feels so bad to then find ourselves in our daily life being miserly, self-absorbed, and oblivious to others’ needs. Our

awakened nature is always asking us, “You have been given so very much, you have received so much deep-down goodness—isn’t it time that you express this in your whole life and share it with others?” This is not some kind of external ethical injunction; it is a felt response of the Soma itself to the suffering beings everywhere. It arises as a passion, an urgency, an almost wild love for others that will not be denied.

The Three Samayas as a Practice

Here are the three samayas again. You can take them as a daily contemplation at the beginning of your practice session. Beyond that, you can take these vows each day to reaffirm your own commitments. Practitioners in our lineage have found it enormously helpful to make this relation with the three samayas each day. Over time, they will just become how you think about things and how you approach them.

The first samaya: I commit today and for each of the remaining days of my life to take refuge in the samaya of the natural state. I commit to hold to my awakened nature. I commit to seek every opportunity to connect with it, develop it, and deepen my relationship with it; I aspire to live my life from the depths of Pure Awareness. If I find myself departing into discursive thought, I will immediately remember and come back to my Soma, and rest in the inconceivable space of my own true nature.

The second samaya: I commit today and for each of the remaining days of my life to take refuge in the samaya of “something to experience,” the ineffable, sacred world of direct experience. I vow to maintain sacred outlook, to regard all the experiences that occur in my life—the situations, emotions, and the people—as utterly pure and beyond thought. If I find myself departing into doubt, judgment, or rejection, I will immediately remember and come back to my Soma, and rest in the unfathomable sacredness of what is occurring.

The third samaya: I commit today and for each of the remaining days of my life to take refuge in the samaya of great compassion. I vow to make my life transparent to the awakened state, to Pure Awareness, so that everything I do reflects its depth, wisdom, and unconditional love. If I find myself departing into actions that reflect hesitation, confusion, aggression, or doubt, I will, again and again, return to the natural state, bringing all the activities of my life into alignment and entrainment with my own deepest being.

Pure Awareness and the Journey of Our Life

IN THIS FINAL SECTION, I want to take our discussion to a deeper level, touching on the larger personal and the cosmic dimensions of Pure Awareness. I do so, first, because the themes I plan to discuss here have been brewing beneath the surface as the underpinnings of everything we have been discussing and practicing in this book. To understand Pure Awareness rightly, we need to be cognizant of this bigger picture. Second, although the experience of these larger dimensions may not be fully available to you for some time to come, you may already have had glimpses or intuitions of them, and I want to legitimize the importance of what you have seen and encourage you that you are on the right track. In this chapter specifically, I would like to broaden our conversation considerably, talking about both the very beginning and also the realization of Pure Awareness, the awakened nature within, and its possible role as the foundation of our entire life.

A moment may come in our life, often when we are very young, when we realize for an instant that there is something out there that captures our entire state of being, something often terrifyingly immense and stamped with the mark of eternity. Whenever it occurs, this is the true beginning of our journey. What makes this moment so powerful and often so confusing is that it happens outside of any personal, familial, religious, or cultural frameworks we may inhabit. This applies even if you are a dyed-in-the-wool, traditional Asian Buddhist, for even here it overturns whatever assumptions and concepts you may have had about what the dharma and realization are.

The shock of touching or, more accurately, being touched by this other, totally compelling thing is so fundamental and, from ego's viewpoint, so out of context that generally we are not going to have the least idea what it was, or how to make sense of it, or even that there is any sense to be made. When I was a

teenager, this wild, enthralling thing inside had its own existence, entirely separate from my everyday teenage world. It was so completely unrelated to what I thought of as “my life,” I didn’t and really couldn’t think about it except to feel its deep somatic pull.

In my career as a university teacher over four decades, at Naropa University and in the more conventional settings of Indiana University and the University of Colorado, I have met many students who know about that compelling, mysterious, eternal thing within. Although they may not know what it is or even what to say or think about it, they are searching, struggling, floundering, trying to find their way back, while in the meantime living their normal, everyday lives.

This flash or perhaps glimmer of eternity has nothing inherently to do with meditation, Buddhism, Tibet, or anything else external. It is the breaking through, into our otherwise preoccupied conventional consciousness, of what is deepest, most ultimate, most sacred in ourselves, our life, and the universe. All that is sensed. No wonder the students I have met, having suddenly realized this immensity, have sometimes been driven fairly mad with longing—for what, they don’t know. And it is sad for me to learn from these same students that many at some point found themselves dragged into psychiatrists’ offices because their parents were frightened and threatened by what their children saw.

At some point, if we are fortunate—but maybe years later—our longing and struggling yield results, and we find a gateway in. We realize that there is something concrete we can do: namely, look into ourselves, through some kind of inner work, to find our way back to that timeless thing that haunts us. We may have heard or read about enlightenment, the Great Awakening, the Hindu atman, the Tao, the mystical Christ within, or some similar teaching; and we may feel strangely attracted and drawn thereto. Often, the gate is a contemplative tradition such as is found in Buddhism, a particular cultural tradition, a certain teacher, a teaching we have been exposed to, or the reports of practitioners. For me, it was the mere mention of the word “Tibet.”

Let’s say we do eventually find our way into a meditative tradition and locate a capable teacher to study with. Immediately a process of deepening and discovery begins to unfold. We start in “kindergarten” with our practice and take our meditation training step by step. Setting aside our spiritual ambition for the most advanced practices, we settle into the beginning of the beginning; for it doesn’t matter what practice you are doing, you will always be practicing exactly where you are, and you will discover exactly what you need to discover at that

particular point.

The more we can find time to meditate, obviously, the more expeditiously things will unfold. But we can never go faster than it is in us to go. Milarepa said, “Hasten slowly, and you will soon arrive.” There should be no sorrow or frustration in this at all, for we have found and stepped onto the path of our own realization. And that is the most positive thing that could ever happen in any human life.

Whatever our age, our past experience, our maturity, our life circumstances, and the strength of our aspiration, we are going find ourselves having to work through a lot of things. In the process of opening to ourselves, our actual state of being, and our life, there is a great deal to discover, much of it difficult; much wishful thinking to let go of; large and small traumas to be unearthed and healed; and a profound reckoning to be made about who we actually are and what we want for our life. We have to address in a realistic and humble way all of our obstacles, both inner and outer, one by one.

As we move forward on this journey, rather than looking exclusively outside, we begin to look more and more to our practice to address the really thorny problems and issues in our mind, our emotional life, our relationships, our school or work, and our larger, outer life. We find that meditation does indeed shed light onto all the situations we encounter, so that we are able to move forward in a genuine way. Our sense of appreciation and commitment to the practice grows and grows. And then, at a certain point, earlier or later, Pure Awareness enters the scene.

Stepping into Pure Awareness

When we first step into the eternity of Pure Awareness, it can be a shocking experience. In that country, eternity is always the time of day. In one sense, it is utterly unlike any place we have ever been or anything we have ever felt. But in another way, we feel we know it better than anything we have ever known in our life.

The popular notion, I suppose, is that eternity is something like our present life, only better, and it goes on forever. But as we continue with our regular practice, we begin to gain a more accurate and realistic sense of the eternity we have glimpsed. As we do, it dawns on us that, actually, eternity is our present world and our present experience when the time coordinates of past, present, and

future are no longer operative. In the country of Pure Awareness, we see—and it is entirely self-evident—that past, present, and future are nothing more than our own conceptual overlays on something else.

In this country, we realize that ordinary time is not at all inherent in experience itself. As we have seen, we may now have perceptual glimpses of things standing forth with a vividness, a plenitude, a life, and even a wildness that obliterate any notion in us that they had any beginning, will have any end, or abide in any locatable way. It is now obvious that eternity is found precisely in the things of this world, when we behold them stripped of our mental projections. When experience arises, as we see in our practice, it presents itself as having no reference to anything extraneous—no “other,” no time, not even any space. It just IS.

Having stepped perhaps momentarily into the eternal land of Pure Awareness, we may find ourselves even more haunted than before. Now the environment of Pure Awareness, which has been somewhere in the background since the beginning of our journey, isn’t so much in the background anymore. At first, we may be doing our customary meditation practice, perhaps following our breath, sitting our *sesshins*, doing our *ngöndro*, saying our mantras. And, abruptly, we may notice a huge background of stillness going on at the same time. If we turn our awareness around and take a look, it is like a vast, empty, open sky, an extraordinarily compelling space that seems to be behind and beneath whatever we are doing. At certain times, it feels like a powerful magnet pulling us inexorably toward it; at others, like an irresistible vortex sucking us down into its depths. At this point, Pure Awareness practice is coming more toward center stage.

As the presence of the background becomes stronger, it begins to become more of a companion to us in our meditation, a kind of tonic note that is always there, although our practice may continue to be about other things. In the context of the somatic practice taught in this book, for example, we may be working with our body, refining our posture, trying to remain within the posture more continuously. More and more frequently, though, we find ourselves tipping our attention back into the background, or maybe we are just pulled there, and we come upon a great sense of peace, relaxation, and relief. Even if just momentarily, we are touching eternity with our body. If we are working with the posture, we will find the back line becoming more and more compelling, calling for greater and greater attention.

So we continue with our regular practice, whatever it may be, and at a certain moment a crucial shift occurs. Up until this shift, we have been working within the various meditational methods that have been enabling us to develop our relationship to our basic nature. We have been attending to various techniques as stepping stones into the unconditioned state. For most of us, nearly our entire journey will involve this method- and technique-oriented approach. Perhaps like me, you have spent or will spend many years and likely decades working within the given forms. This is necessary and appropriate.

But then one day it dawns on us that we have a more direct and immediate access to the awakened state, one that no longer seems to require the mediation of the specific practices we have been doing all these years. Of course, it is the practices themselves that have brought us to this point, and now we can appreciate them in a new and deeper way. At the same time, though, now we find that the technique-oriented approach is becoming something of an obstacle. As our default practice mode, we continue to resort to it, but increasingly we feel uneasy, sensing that we actually don't need to be doing that and actually shouldn't. At this point, we not only can, we must let go of the past "dharma" we have based our life on in order to take the next step. This includes letting go not just of the forms and techniques of practice, but equally of what we have studied, learned, and assumed up to this point to be "the truth."

All the techniques and perspectives that we have learned and to which we have been so devoted are never going to be set entirely and definitively aside; at moments, we will need them and will be grateful we have them as a resource to fall back on. At the same time, however, now our principal task is to work directly with Pure Awareness itself.

I use the term "work" advisedly, because now the journey forward is going to require that we relinquish any and all techniques and let go into the natural awareness, as is said, with which we were born. The main instruction at this point is simply to let our natural, spontaneous awareness remain in its own place. Our primary challenge is to allow it to be without trying to change it in any way, without trying to manipulate or "improve" it in the slightest.

We have the capacity to do this because in the form practices—in our case, the posture of Pure Awareness—we have learned how to arrive in the basic state and also what it looks like once we are there. We have learned how to come into the original awareness in the lower belly, the central channel, and elsewhere and how to abide there at least for a little while. Having done that, now we can begin

to move off of those stepping stones and just be within the Pure Awareness itself, with no crutches and no supports.

Letting go of our entire dharma past, its ideas, approaches, and methods, is no easy task. We have spent a tremendous amount of time and energy maybe over a lifetime learning them and steeping ourselves in them. Whenever we were lost or confused, anxious or afraid, there was always this miraculous resource to look to. Whenever we found ourselves in trouble, it was our protection, our reference point, and our guide. But now something much more naked, exposed, and vulnerable is emerging. If we are honest with ourselves, we see that until now we have been interposing “the dharma” between us and Pure Awareness! While necessary for our journey, the fact is we have been engaging in a subtle spiritual materialism; we have been hiding out.

At this point, we are being called to step into the practice of what is termed *nondistracted nonmeditation*. “Nonmeditation” means that we are abandoning all techniques and allowing the simplicity of the awakened state to just be. “Nondistracted” means that we are training to not depart from this primordial awakening.

Moving beyond Form

Pure Awareness is now a country we find ourselves able to visit at will. For now, these visits may be quite brief, lasting only a moment or two, but if we let go into the experience even for only a few seconds, there is the sense that we are resetting our entire system. It feels like we are going back to square one—actually, the square zero of our basic nature. In that small moment of touching base, it can be that everything feels cleared out and purified. Then, when we come back to our more normal consciousness, we find ourselves renewed and refreshed and ready for whatever life is going to be right now.

Something instigates these short visits to the land of Pure Awareness: the feeling of subtle claustrophobia in our meditation practice. In our intentional practice, of course, we are meditating with a goal in mind, a set of specific techniques to follow, and various expectations of the outcome. Inevitably, we carry along in something of a top-down way.

The more we do the practice, though, the more that painful feeling of being suffocated by our thoughts and expectations builds up. Ironically, it is this somewhat top-down approach that has developed the extreme sensitivity in us to

sense its in-built limitations. At some point the claustrophobia reaches a crescendo, and we literally cannot bear it any longer. In that moment we let go into Pure Awareness and find immediate relief. This rather automatic dynamic keeps whatever practice we are doing on track. In feeling so closed in and finding no alternative but to let go into that big space, our tendency toward spiritual materialism, to trying to use the practice to stay in control, is burned up and purified. We can now return to our practice with a deeper connection to our primordial being and work more out of that space.

Without our much having to think about it, we also begin to visit the territory of Pure Awareness when we are in the midst of our ordinary life, engaged in our normal activities. As was the case when we were meditating, so here too the instigating factor is a brewing claustrophobia that escalates to a crescendo. In whatever we may be trying to accomplish, our habitual tendency is to push things along, gently or aggressively, depending on what our personal style may be. This kind of pushing is, by definition, the primary characteristic of the left-brain, thinking ego, tending always to override whatever is going on. But, sensitive as we are becoming to the openness, relaxation, and vastness of Pure Awareness, it doesn't feel right anymore.

We might say that it never felt right, and that may be true. But now our increased attunement to Pure Awareness means that in daily life, as when on the meditation cushion, the feeling of having exited from the fullness of our somatic experience into a small, restricted, petty consciousness can be excruciating. The claustrophobia builds until, like the mountain climber clinging to the side of a cliff whose strength has finally given out, we let go and commit ourselves into the unfathomable void—of reality. We fall back into Pure Awareness, and there is instant, blessed release and relaxation. In speaking of this claustrophobia in the midst of daily life, I am not talking about unusual or extreme situations but, rather, of how we are always trying to manage the situations and people we are continually encountering.

Choosing Eternity

Up to this point, we have not really addressed the issue of how long it might be possible to remain within Pure Awareness. We have not been asking, "Could I stay in that country for more than these brief moments?" We haven't raised that question because up until now it wasn't the appropriate time to ask it. It was

enough and far more than enough to be able to visit more and more at will and to find such immediate and thorough relief. But now we do begin to wonder, “Would it be possible to remain there for a while? How would that be?”

If we look into ourselves, we will likely find that way, way back, from the very beginning of this journey, there was always a part of us that longed not just to touch this infinite thing but to live there. Not even just to have our green card, but to be a full and permanent citizen—to take up residency. Of course, early on we never could have put this into words or even formulated the thought; but the longing was there. So now that longing has returned, but in a much more explicit, strong, and insistent way.

In Tibetan Buddhism, this is known as “the moment of ascertainment.” Up until now, in spite of all the flashes, awakenings, and discoveries, a great deal of who we are has been left out of the picture. We may have had strong feelings about the territory we have glimpsed, but many unanswered questions have been rumbling around in our brain. “Is this really real?” “Should I really take it *that* seriously?” “Can I really trust what I seem to have experienced?” “Is my current way of living really all that bad?” “Who are these teachers anyway, and what is this tradition of Pure Awareness all about?” And, “Can I trust any of it?”

More important, though, are the questions that we have perhaps not thought to ask ourselves because they are a bit daunting. “What are the implications of all of this for my ordinary life?” “To nourish this practice, what might I have to do?” “Am I really up for the journey that may be implied by what I have experienced so far?” Up until this point, on some basic level, we have been hoping—we have been assuming, actually—that we are going to be able to carry on with our habitual life: to strive to be happy with all the means we have at our disposal and, at the same time, to pursue our practice in an ultimately satisfying way. The perfect life. But now we are beginning to sense something fishy there. Still, a large part of us is just not sure how fully we want or need to jump into this journey and make it the centerpiece of our life.

At a certain point—and when this happens, it is strictly a result of our practice and not in any way under our conscious control—something dawns on us. A realization suddenly appears: “The country of Pure Awareness, the fact that it even *is*, is a miracle. It is what I have longed for my entire life. It is what I have been seeking, even in my greatest confusion and my darkest nights, with every breath I have taken. How could I now possibly be doubting it—doubting that this is what my life is for? And even considering not plunging in completely? What

is wrong with me? Am I crazy with self-delusion?” This new clarity about Pure Awareness and what it actually means for us may well be accompanied by remorse and sadness. “Look at how I have wasted so much of my life, spending my life-force in wishful thinking, looking for pleasure, grasping after comfort, security, and the rest of it. Fooling myself all these years when actually I knew better all along!”

So at this the moment of ascertainment, we must make a choice. We may have been practicing with many experiences and realizations, but now we realize that to go further, we actually have to *choose* eternity. We see that it is not going to happen by itself; we actually have to decide upon it, fix our strongest intention on it, sign up for it, and determine to make it our first and, in some sense, our only priority.

Now there can come a fundamental and decisive transition and transformation. We admit to ourselves how important the realization of Pure Awareness is and always has been for us. At this point, we begin a new process: we accept completely and unconditionally, consciously and with great sincerity, that Pure Awareness and Pure Awareness alone is the core value of our life. “This is it. This is what I want.” Though doubts still come up, they are now seen more as unwelcome arrivals to be given no credit and to be quickly ushered out of our mind.

With this ascertainment or recognition, we can begin the painful process of reviewing our life, as it has existed and as it exists now, to see where it is aligned and where it is not aligned with the journey we now admit we most deeply want to make. Where do our values, our assumptions and beliefs, our preoccupations and engagements, our relationships, and everything we do in work, love, and play reflect the depth of our aspiration, and where do they not? Where are they aligned with this journey we want to make, and where are they just getting in the way?

A commitment of new depth, based on an imperative from within us, has been made. Now we will spend the rest of our life devoting as much time, energy, and attention as we can to our practice and, simultaneously, simplifying and clarifying our life, creating much more opportunity for us to visit and begin to explore our ancient heart’s desire, the country of Pure Awareness.

Our meditation practice now is governed not so much by external standards, such as length of time spent in a session, specific practices accomplished, or how well we are fulfilling the criteria of any given lineage. Now really the only

important questions are: How fully and completely are we able to let go into Pure Awareness? How long is it before we exit? And how can we gradually dismantle our tendencies to run away?

One of the first things we discover is that definitively not exiting into thinking is not going to be that easy. In fact, there is a part of us that actually *likes* thinking—or, perhaps better to say, remains hooked on it. Though we do experience the claustrophobia of it, we find something familiar and reassuring in being able to think about things. And we begin to suspect that our biggest and most tenacious addiction is our addiction to the thinking itself.

And why not? We may feel immense relief and joy when we first sit down and enter the land of Pure Awareness, but after a certain period of time we may begin to feel restless and uncomfortable. The outside world of our daily life is out there, and we may feel it nagging us. Maybe some particular issue, problem, or upcoming activity is tugging at us. In addition, while in one sense we feel complete sitting there, the prospect of remaining there and never thinking again is actually terrifying. We may supplicate the lineage, as Milarepa did, to “grant your blessings that I may not ever again exit my basic nature and return to thinking,” but there is another part of us that can’t wait to flee.

Of course, all of these—even the subtle feelings of being pulled—are thoughts obtruding into our mind and hijacking us. This is not a big deal; it just indicates that we are not quite settled enough. Rather than taking such occurrences as indicating anything other than our need to settle further, we can simply carry on without a doubt and attend to our practice.

Pure Awareness is a country where eternity reigns, and it is also a place where experience is marked with infinity. When we release external phenomena into their own nature and let them be, we see they are limitless. Commonly, we think of infinity as being like our ordinary experience but just much, much bigger. But let us think of what “infinite” actually means, “not finite.” Phenomena typically appear to us as limited—that is, with definable identities and boundaries—but only because we place the labels of conceptual thought on them to locate them on our mental map. When those thought overlays are released, then we experience phenomena as they truly are, infinite—not located anywhere, with no particular ascertainable identity, with no end, and with endless possibilities. At that point, as we have seen, we experience the livingness and the potency of experience, its sacredness.

So we’ve been a little distracted, a little lost, not quite present, and have been

looking for the gate back in. At a certain point, no matter what we have been feeling or what has been happening, the air suddenly clears. Then there is just “that place,” with nothing else whatever going on. We are high up in the eternal, mountainous terrain, the air is crystalline, the light soft, luminous and diaphanous, and the natural phenomena stand out brilliant and clear, reverberating with reality. At such moments, we may well feel as if we could sit like this forever, and quite possibly someday we will. Everything here, everything fulfilled and complete, never any need to think again.

We now understand quite clearly that human life, our life, was ultimately meant to be lived in silence—complete silence and peace, in which thinking about things never needs to enter the scene. Terrifying perhaps, but now at the same time, so obvious. In fact, we discover that we can relate to things with so much more precision and elegance from within the total stillness, for we are able to take them exactly for what they are and we can connect with them directly, without the static or interference of thinking.

In the beginning, abiding in eternity, where everything is infinite, seems like a very daunting prospect. However, as I have been saying, through the practice we gradually become accustomed to that fabulous country where there is no birth and no death, where everything—each phenomenon—is revealed as a living presence, laughing, playing, cavorting, and inviting us into the dance. Through the practice, we have changed. More and more we find ourselves drawing nearer to Pure Awareness and finally discovering that we have arrived at the ever-longed-for destination.

Conclusion

AS WE HAVE SEEN IN the distinctive Vajrayana teaching of the correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm, our human incarnation is an instance of universal cosmic reality. In fathoming—through our somatic practice—the fundamental realities and processes of our embodied human existence, we are at the same time witnessing the fundamental realities and processes of the cosmos. Our human body is, exactly, universal reality. To know our own body in its most profound dimensions is, then, exactly to know the cosmos in its totality as it ultimately is.

Today, we can explore the external cosmos through ever more sophisticated devices: we can journey into outer space, to the moon, Mars, and beyond, and we can think, speculate, and theorize about what we find. We can marvel at all the wonders of the astounding universe in which we find ourselves and the infinite space that holds it. And our unending exploration is always going to be driven by something immensely moving and deeply human: we want to know and, truth be told, we want to draw as close as we can to the naked experience of all this magnificence and mystery—we long to experience it as fully and nakedly as we are able. But of course, we are here and it is all “out there,” and the pain of that unbridgeable chasm will always remain. Or will it?

Most religions and spiritualities acknowledge this human longing not just to know the ultimate realities, but to come closer to them and perhaps experience them for ourselves. Thus they propose various “left brain” solutions, theological and philosophical models, systems of belief and faith, various rituals and hierarchies, institutions, forms of behavior, and communities that they say assure results. They are suggesting that these will satisfy our deep spiritual longing now or sometime later. Conventional Buddhism is, alas, not always so very different in this respect from other historical traditions.

The approach of Vajrayana is, as we have seen, entirely different. It invites us

to descend into the subcortical regions of our being, into the nonconceptual territory of our body, and there, to see what we see, explore the geography we find, and follow the thread of our mysterious and unknown life that begins to unfold. “The great wisdom is found in the body.” Initially, perhaps very burrowed down into this practice, any sense of interiority falls completely apart and we abruptly find ourselves not just directly present to the cosmic totality but in no way different or separate from it.

So in the womblike space of our fundamental Soma, it is not just that we get to experience *something like* the cosmic womb, the quantum emptiness out of which all cosmic life was born and continues to be born. We experience, exactly, that universal womb. We know it directly and for ourselves because our primordial, innermost birthing place *is* the cosmic womb with no difference.

Likewise, when we are present to the birth of the energy out of our somatic womb and inseparable from it—the very life-force of our being—we are experiencing the universal life-force of the cosmos. It is not *similar to* the energy that arose and is arising from the quantum cosmic womb, it *is* the very same reality, again, with no difference.

And, finally, when we experience the movement inherent within the energy of our basic nature, we are experiencing the primal, cosmic life-force further evolving into everything that has come since: the entire, living web of whatever universes may exist, throughout time and space.

This is why, in the Vajrayana, to speak of the process of spirituality and the process of Life itself as being different or even distinct makes no sense whatever. This is not a theological or philosophical matter, it is experiential. If we follow the tantric prompts to explore our human body, we discover for ourselves that spiritual realization *is* the realization of Life itself as the ultimate and final reality, inclusive of its womb, the life-force, and all that follows.

Thus, what we behold in the illumination of enlightenment is not only our own true life but the life of the cosmos and, beyond that, Life itself as ultimate reality. We see that in our own life, as we discover it in practice, the infinite glory of Life is revealed as it expresses itself in all things moving and unmoving, throughout the infinite reaches of being. Our own deepest life, and Life itself, are, we now realize, in no way separate or distinct. Our life *is* universal Life and is unveiled as the unsurpassable reality and fundamental fabric of what is. In knowing our own life to its full depths, we are not just experiencing the universal reality, we are one with it. That, and nothing else, is enlightenment—

the ultimate spiritual realization.

Thus we arrive at an essential part of the distinctive Vajrayana discovery: that the ultimate is not emptiness or some static spiritual state. No, the ultimate reality of whatever is, is something essentially dynamic, always in movement, ever unfolding: this is Life itself. The realization of Pure Awareness, then, is Life itself as reality in its most fundamental, definitive, and supreme form. In our Pure Awareness practice, in the depths of our human experience, we have been meeting the universal Life over and over.

This accounts for the tremendous joy, the limitless expansiveness, and the sense of oneness we increasingly feel—in our practice and our larger life—with all that is. And it accounts for an unshakable confidence we may find in our own life and for an unconditional optimism toward everything, life in its largest extent—what Trungpa Rinpoche called “the ultimate positivity of Vajrayana.”

For the Vajrayana, spirituality and life, then are not two separate things, but one and the same. Our primordial longing as humans to find out who we are, why we are, and what our life is for is the most primal and profound of all spiritual longings. Simply to live and to seek meaning in our life, then, is already to be fully engaged in the deepest of all spiritual quests.

Pure Awareness is the arena for the revelation of Life itself. As we progress along our path of practice, we journey deeper and deeper into the heart of Life. We discover ourselves, including everything about us, as one of the ten thousand things. And just as Life runs through the veins of each of the other of the ten thousand things, so it runs through ours. There is no difference.

Now we’re able to see that our own life—in its tiniest details and its entire scope, in its pain, confusion, inspiration, discoveries, disillusionment and despair, illuminations and fulfillments—is in fact the life-force of the universe revealing, fulfilling, and celebrating itself. This is why the inspiration to find out who we are to that eternal thing is nothing but the beckoning of Life.

From the beginning, we may have had the inspiration; what we have lacked, though, are tools to explore this profound intuition and follow our road to the end. This is what the practice of Pure Awareness offers us: a way to make the journey that has always been us, perhaps since long before we were born.

When we consider Pure Awareness in its various aspects, and especially culminating in spontaneous responsiveness, we see that our life, in its tiniest details and its comprehensive scope, is *for* the others. Seeing this, we discover that actually everything is *for* everything else. Everything that occurs anywhere

within the immeasurable expanse, from subatomic particles up to the Totality itself, is *for* everything else. How could we humans be any different?

But we have this little problem of overadaptation. The thinking function of our left-brain prefrontal cortex has more or less overrun and pushed out much of our experience of being human, especially since the rise of agriculture; and it has been accelerating out of control ever since, especially in the last century. Our problem is that we have lost touch with the fullness of who we really are as humans. We no longer see ourselves as expressions of something much more vast and meaningful and intimately interconnected with everything else. And then, descending further into the darkness, we try to rationalize and legitimize our lack of connection. And, finally, we lose even the awareness of how disconnected we have become.

The natural consequence is that most of us have also lost the ability to have any insight into our own basic nature and the sacredness of our own given life; and then, unable to see ourselves truly, we are no longer able to see how it is with the others, the sacredness of their own lives, and how each of them participates along with us in the great round. And so we wind up living out our lives within a very small compass indeed, in a little bubble of our own making, ignorant of what the life of ourselves and others could be.

The way back for us is actually very easy. All we have to do is begin to tune in to our own deeper nature. If we can set aside enough of our habitual tendencies to allow something else to happen, then the living world that has been there all along can begin to come into view. It is there, just out of view, waiting for us, and not necessarily in a passive way. For some lucky ones, in fact, in certain extreme or catastrophic moments, it comes crashing through well-constructed defenses and reveals itself in a way that cannot be denied. And then—providing, of course, that we have at least enough confidence in ourselves to trust what we have actually seen—the journey toward wholeness and reintegration back into the cosmic totality can begin. From there on, the path is pretty obvious and straightforward. Life, noticing that we have noticed, will lead us along.

Will things have to get much worse for ourselves personally and for the planet before we begin to catch on? Or admit to ourselves what we already know? Maybe part of us is waiting around to see. Maybe we are hoping things are not that bad and that there will be plenty of time. But such hesitation, especially at this moment in our planet's history, would seem to be playing dice with the universe—or, more perilously, Russian roulette—and the wager on the table is

not only our own precious life, but the well-being of everybody else and of our very world.

This sailing ship of our life is now moored at the dock of conventional thinking. But ships were made to sail. Our vessel is ready and is calling us to cast off the moorings and set out on the open ocean of our larger life, of Life itself. So here it sits, waiting, resplendent in the sunlight. But the clouds are gathering and the day is darkening. In fact, there are signs that fierce weather may be rushing upon us. Why would we hang back now? Shouldn't we just get to it?

LIST OF AUDIO TRACKS

AUDIO RECORDINGS OF THE MEDITATION practices in this book are available for free download at www.shambhala.com/practiceofpureawareness.

1. Introduction to Guided Practices
2. Guided Practice I
3. Guided Practice II
4. Guided Practice III
5. Introduction to Guided Practice IV
6. Guided Practice IV

NOTES

Introduction

1. These are succinctly spelled out in an early article: Chögyam Trungpa and Rigdzin Shikpo, “The Way of Maha Ati,” in *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa*, vol. 1, ed. Carolyn Gimian (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2003), 461–465.

Chapter One: What Is Somatic Meditation?

1. Reginald A. Ray, *The Awakening Body: Somatic Meditation for Discovering Our Deepest Life* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2016).
2. For a fuller discussion of somatic meditation, see Ray, *The Awakening Body*, introduction and part 1, 21–28.
3. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching, or Book of Changes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 17.

Chapter Two: The Body in Tantric Awareness

1. I use the term “left brain” advisedly as a convenient way to indicate the discursive, thinking part of our mind. This is in sharp contrast to our “Soma”—all the aspects of our knowing that are direct and unmediated by our thinking. The Soma includes our right brain, the subcortical regions of our brain such as the brain stem, and, of course, the many processing centers throughout our body such as our heart and our gut. Using “left brain” in this way is more analogical than precise, for while the left brain is indeed the primary seat of our thinking function, in fact, that function is geographically distributed over a larger part of our brain. For a discussion of the various ways in which neuroscientists refer to the thinking function

(left brain, top down, endogenous, et cetera), see Ray, *The Awakening Body*, 21–25.

Chapter Three: Pure Awareness and Traditional Tibetan Vajrayana

1. Kazuaki Tanahashi, ed., “Body-and-Mind Study of the Way,” in *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2012), 426.

Chapter Six: The Five Skandhas of the Illusory Ego

1. Chögyam Trungpa, *The Path of Individual Liberation*, vol. 1 of *The Profound Treasury of the Ocean of Dharma*, compiled and edited by Judith L. Lief (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2013), 6–10.

Chapter Seven: How the Practice of Pure Awareness Addresses the Skandhas

1. Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* (Boston, MA: Weatherhill, 1970), 21–25.
2. Restricted Vajrayana practice commentary, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2013.

Chapter Eight: The Essential Instructions for Pure Awareness Practice

1. See Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 21–25. See also Dogen’s *Fukanzazengi* in Kazuaki Tanahashi, ed., “Rules for Zazen,” in *Treasury of the Dharma Eye* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2012), 579–580.

Chapter Nine: Guided Practice I

1. In Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, *Rainbow Painting: A Collection of Miscellaneous Aspects of Developments and Completion* (Hong Kong: Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 1995), 125.
2. This phrase is most associated with Case 23 in the Mumokan. See Robert Aitken, trans. and ed., *The Gateless Barrier* (New York, NY: North Point Press, 1995), 153.

Chapter Twelve: Guided Practice IV

1. This teaching goes back to the sutras of the Buddha. In the *Anguttara Nikaya*, the Buddha instructs one of his disciples, formerly a lute player, that the same principle applies to practicing with the mind as tuning a lute—not too tight, and not too loose. See Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Anguttara Nikaya* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 933.

Chapter Thirteen: A Closer Look at Feeling and Impulse

1. Hongzhi Tengue, *Cultivating the Empty Field: The Silent Illumination of Zen Master Hongzhi*, trans. Taigen Dan Leighton (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Books, 2000).

Chapter Fourteen: Working with Feeling and Impulse on and off the Cushion

1. See Chögyam Trungpa, *Glimpses of Abhidharma: From a Seminar on Buddhist Psychology* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2001), where this interpretation appears throughout.

Chapter Seventeen: Obstacles and Antidotes

1. Hongzhi's evocative phrase, from *Cultivating the Empty Field*, 30.

Chapter Nineteen: The Wonders of the Natural Body

1. Thornton Wilder, *Our Town: A Play in Three Acts* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2003), 54.

Chapter Twenty: Shila, the Crucible and Protection of Our Practice

1. Daniel Goleman and Richard J. Davidson, *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body* (New York, NY: Avery, 2017).
2. See Goleman and Davidson, *Altered Traits*, 299n20: “While drugs can induce altered states, they do not help with altered traits.”

Chapter Twenty-One: Shila in the Modern-Day Context

1. Complicating and exacerbating the situation for educators, there are demographics of students—young people of color, young LGBTQ folks—who bring a great deal of trauma from previous educational situations and have good reason to expect more of the same in college. Then there are left-leaning students who cannot tolerate the idea of a right-wing speaker being on their campus.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Complete Openness and “Something to Experience” in Practice and Daily Life

1. Trungpa and Shikpo, “The Way of Maha Ati,” 461, 463.
2. Trungpa and Shikpo, “The Way of Maha Ati,” 462.
3. Trungpa and Shikpo, “The Way of Maha Ati,” 462.

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feelings and
formless practices in
inseparability of life and spirituality in
preliminary practices in
Pure Awareness and
somatic meditation and
“something to experience” and
three samayas and
ultimate positivity of
view of trauma

vipashyana

defined
in Pure Awareness practice
union with shamatha

waiting, as eternal abiding
“what there is to experience”
authentic relationships and
dropping into
as radiance of emptiness
resolving trauma and
shila and
See also “something to experience”

Wilder, Thornton

witness

yidam. *See also* deity practice

Zen

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